

Rob and Kit

by the author of

"Miss Teeszy's Mission" and "Laddie"

CHILDREN'S BOOK
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ROB AND KIT.





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BY THE AUTHOR OF

"TIP-CAT," "MISS TOOSEY'S MISSION,"
"LADDIE," Etc.



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ROB AND KIT.

CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND SON.

"A gentle knight was pricking on the plaine."
SPENSER.

MY story begins, as many stories used in days gone by, with a solitary horseman wending his way under the scorching rays of a midsummer sun, along the glaring, white chalk road, cut across a wide-spreading common in Sussex.

But here all similarity to those old romances ceases, for the individual of whom I write bore no resemblance to the heroes of old, having nothing mysterious or interesting about him. His hat was not slouched down to conceal his features — being, indeed, rather on the back of his head — nor was a heavy cloak wrapped about him, luckily for him, considering the heat of the day. He carried no pistols in his holsters, nor was he travel-stained, except for the dust, which settled on every available point of his person, as it did on the dry gorse-bushes and thirsty bits of grass by the roadside.

He was a good deal heated by his efforts to urge on his steed, and at the same time prevent his trou-

sers from working up towards his knees, as is the way those articles have of annoying unaccustomed riders.

The horse would certainly have been described by the novelist as jaded, but his rider was not to be held accountable for the signs of fatigue manifested, which were the accumulation of many years passed in a milk-cart, to which walk in life may be traced his tendency to zigzag along the road from one side to the other, and to stop at all the back-doors, when he was in the neighbourhood of houses. Since then, he had been let out for hire on the esplanade at Seadown, and had stood, with hanging head and bent knees, among the doggedly patient donkeys with their white and scarlet saddle-cloths, and malicious-looking glassy-eyed goats with wagging beards. The boys in attendance played pitch-and-toss on the shingle below till an excursion came, when the animals' patience had to give way to more active endurance.

But the season at Seadown had hardly begun yet, and it was only yesterday that the bathing machines had been brought down from the field at the top of the town, where they were stowed away for the winter months, and old Joe was brought in from the common, where he picked up a precarious living through the winter, to drag them down.

So when Rob Chambers asked if there was anything available to take him over to Lowburn, six miles away, Newman, the proprietor of the bathing machines, volunteered to let him have old Joe, "as have a deal of go left in him still, though he ain't much to look at neither."

Neither was Rob himself much to look at, anyhow according to his father's opinion. Dr. Chambers used to contemplate his only son and heir with undisguised disapproval which, of course, made Rob twice as awkward and ungainly as nature had formed him. But to be looked at critically through a gold-rimmed eyeglass by a cold, disparaging eye, would have turned Ariel himself into a Caliban.

Dr. Chambers was so eminently refined and elegant himself, such a gentleman all over — from the top of his head, where his hair was turning a little silver on the temples, to the tips of his well cared-for taper fingers and toes of his well clad feet. He carried himself so well, his voice was so full and melodious; his broad brow and clear-cut features and firm mouth, impressed beholders with a sense of power which was wonderfully consoling and uplifting in times of doubt or danger. But in the hour of death, I have known people find more comfort in the presence of little Mr. Johnson, fat and shabby and short of "h's" as he was, and grossly ignorant as was generally acknowledged.

"Why, he just sat down and cried like a child that day our Ben was took."

So I suppose, though he had not the gift of prophecy, and did not understand all mysteries and all knowledge, he had that greatest gift of all — love, which was wanting in Dr. Chambers.

Once when Rob was ill, one of his feverish fancies was that his father was hollow — like one of those inflated bladder-balls of many colours sold on the

beach — and that a prick might reduce him to very small, and shrivelled, and unimposing dimensions. In later years, when father and son were enduring some of these *tête-a-têtes* which were equally distasteful to both of them, the childish fancy would recur to Rob's mind, and in an incoherent sort of way, he would wonder if, inside the elegance and culture and artificiality, there might be a real little man — like the pea in the middle of the great shining pink ball that made the babies on the sands so perfectly happy for ten minutes, and grievously afflicted for half an hour afterwards.

But this comparison of Dr. Chambers will give the reader far too trifling and light-minded an impression of him. For though St. Paul reckoned knowledge and learning and eloquence as weighing nothing when, put into the scale against charity, a distinguished member of the medical profession, an M.D. belonging to half a dozen learned and scientific societies, would not suggest an air-ball to the world at large.

Rob's mother had died when he was born. She was a simple, good sort of girl, with an unbounded admiration for her gifted husband; and, perhaps, their married life was too short for her to apply the matrimonial pin, and discover the real little man within the splendid greatness. And, perhaps, it was quite as well.

He had not married again, as most people prophesied he would; and many did all in their power to make their prophecies come true, and provide a suitable step-mother for Rob, who, from the very

first, did not satisfactorily play the part assigned him by Nature, of a poor little motherless child — a poor little neglected lamb, sadly requiring the maternal care, which many a kindly heart of widow or spinster yearned to bestow.

He was robustly healthy to begin with, and, if he was left to the care of servants, he certainly did credit to that care — being fat and solid and red and mottled, to a degree that no other baby in Seadown, with the most devoted of mothers, could compete with.

His lungs were beyond suspicion, as he testified by his howls under the blandishments of various ladies who met his perambulator on the esplanade ; and he conducted himself with a dreadful want of consideration, on the one occasion when Dr. Chambers had him brought down to display to some admiring and pitiful ladies.

Dr. Chambers had so large an experience of other people's babies, that he ought to have known better than to disturb his youthful son so immediately after his mid-day meal, and, having done so, to take him from his nurse's arms.

The immediate result was the sudden and violent return of that mid-day meal all over Dr. Chambers' immaculate waistcoat — a situation in which the most dignified and elegant person cannot avoid looking ridiculous, perhaps, all the more so, from the extra dignity and elegance. It is very difficult to forgive any one who makes us appear ridiculous, and I am afraid it was some time before Dr. Chambers

could look with complaisancy on this unconscious delinquent.

And this want of complaisancy in his son, had extended even to the day when we make that son's acquaintance, riding on old Joe across the downs. Where the boy got his personal appearance from was a puzzle to all beholders ; for Mrs. Chambers, though not a striking beauty, was fair and pleasant to behold, and Dr. Chambers was, in most people's estimation, a decidedly good-looking man.

Rob had a broad, good-natured face, with very large ears standing out on either side like handles, and small round blue eyes that were utterly out of control, and expressed every simple feeling of the mind within, with the most transparent and occasionally inconvenient sincerity, even when that blurt-ing, unmanageable tongue of his was reduced to silence.

He grew very fast, with long legs and arms that outgrew trousers and jacket-sleeves in an extraordinary manner ; and his awkwardness made his big hands and feet more conspicuous, and any defects in his clothing more patent to the most casual observer.

And if his personal appearance was a puzzle to believers in heredity, so also was his mind — to which book-learning was as repugnant as it was congenial to his father. His mother, it is true, was not highly gifted, and sons, they say, get their intellects mostly from their mothers ; but she came of a distinctly literary stock, and there had been distinguished intellects among her immediate connections, so that

poor Rob's deficiencies could not be laid to her charge.

Every year Dr. Chambers had to modify his hopes and intentions for Rob. It very soon became plain that Rob had no turn for science, and could never become the coadjutor and sympathizer in his father's pursuits, which had been fondly anticipated when he lay in the chrysalis form in his cradle, as capable of developing into a gorgeous butterfly as any other chrysalis or red-faced baby.

His whole education from the very beginning — from the alphabet on round pieces of card spread on the nursery floor out of a squeaking round box — was a more thorny path than most have to encounter: beset with troubles, tears, prolonged standing in corners, abnormally early going to bed, deprivation of pudding — gradually passing on to canings, detentions, impositions; and through it all Rob came out pretty well as ignorant as he went in, and as good-natured and simple-minded and clumsy.

Really Dr. Chambers had some reason to feel hardly used by Providence, and to look with ill-concealed impatience at this son of his, on whose education he would have willingly expended liberally, if it had not been so clearly a case of casting pearls before swine.

It would not have been so afflicting if Rob had developed into the ornamental young country gentleman — idle and feather-brained and extravagant. I think his father could have stood that better than the solid, awkward steadiness of Rob. "Such a good

creature !” lady patients said to the doctor of his son, meaning to please him ; and the doctor, though he assented cordially, felt in his heart of hearts that even a dash of vice would be preferable to such a negative sort of goodness, which seemed merely the want of wit to be otherwise.

It was idle to think of sending him to Oxford even if he could have matriculated, and equally impossible to get him into Sandhurst ; so when my story begins, Rob Chambers’ future walk in life was an unsolved problem.

Dr. Chambers had a mind that chafed at unsolved problems, and he was disposed to get Rob on his brain, and to let him interfere with his digestion and his sleep ; so that he felt a sensible relief when Rob announced that morning at breakfast his intention of going over to Lowburn, from whence he should not be back till late on in the evening.

“How are you going? I am driving the other way, or I could set you a bit on the way. It must be pretty near eight miles.”

“I can walk.”

“It’s going to be a blazing hot day.”

“I can take it easy.”

Rob was already two shades redder in complexion from his father’s unusual interest and concern about his arrangements ; and the doctor, sitting opposite to him, so cool and composed in mind and body, wondered if any inducement on earth would make him trudge eight mortal miles under a broiling sun, and what tinge of complexion Rob would have acquired when he got there.

"You might have the mare," the doctor said reflectively, "only ——"

But just then Rob upset the milk-jug, which changed the subject and saved the doctor the necessity of weighing the perils to the mare's knees and to Rob's brains. And as he stepped into his well-appointed victoria half an hour later, he called back to Rob at the door —

"Perhaps you could get a mount from Newman."

So this was how it was that Rob was riding towards Lowburn on old Joe.

CHAPTER II.

LOWBURN VICARAGE.

"A little lowly hermitage it was,
Down in a dale hard by a forest side
Farre from resort of people that did pass
In travell to and fro."

SPENSER.

LOWBURN lies in a hollow of those Sussex downs — an oasis in the great wide, breezy, exposed uplands, across which the winter's winds tear and sweep, with nothing to oppose their fury but the ragged gorse-bushes, or here and there a twisted thorn, grown all on one side like some poor nymph hurrying away from the rough caresses of rude Boreas.

To-day the most modest maiden might have welcomed one of his brisk, fresh kisses on her hot cheek, except that any wind would have blown up the thick white dust. There was the warm apricot smell of the gorse, which mocked the golden glory of the sun with its shining flowers, round which the bees hummed their never-ending song of happy labour, and white and sulphur butterflies hovered in light-hearted idleness.

The heather was not out yet to add its regal purple to the gold of the gorse, and its buds only gave a

bronze tint where the shoulder of the down raised it against the blue of the sky.

You come on Lowburn quite suddenly when you have begun to doubt the veracity of the mossy old milestones—the last of which announced the distance to that place as only one mile—while on ahead apparently the downs went on uninterruptedly, gorse and heather, chalk road and cloud-shadows and white sheep, till further orders.

And just as you are beginning to feel in despair, and to use strong language, and to glance back at the weary long road behind you, to be retraced if you have come a fool's errand, lo and behold! there is Lowburn at your feet—so that you might throw a pebble down on to one of the thatched roofs that cluster so snugly round the old church in the hollow. And the road goes down at such a sharp pitch, that an unwary rider or driver might get down to the bottom, and into the pond there, uncomfortably quickly; and the road is worn into deep ruts by the heavy drags the waggons put on, and the grunting squeak of the locked wheels is a familiar sound in the village ears.

Approached from the other side, it is visible from a greater distance, and the hill is not so abrupt, and to right and left the valley spreads for a considerable distance, ultimately, on the left, opening on the sea, for, as the name Lowburn implies, the valley is altogether the work of the small stream that runs through the village street. It is crossed by a plank bridge with a hand-rail, and the children sail their walnut-shell boats in it, and the ducks paddle about, and the women

throw their cabbage-stalks ; and altogether it is not treated with the respect due to one who has carried out engineering work on such a large scale, and in the course of ages, scooped out so snug and sheltered a nest for the Lowburn villagers.

And just as the roaring winter winds blow right overhead and hardly stir the big myrtle by the Vicarage porch, so it seemed as if the winds of fashion were also unfelt down in the hollow ; and the Lowburn folk kept simpler, and life was less complicated than in the outside world.

Smock-frocks lingered here long after they had become something to stare and giggle at over at Seadown, and sun-bonnets of really ancient lineage and unpretending ugliness — altogether different from the *parvenu* elegance brought into vogue by Kate Greenaway.

When the young people of Lowburn tried their wings and made a flutter out into the world, they had to serve a cruel apprenticeship at first. But when once they had served their time to the lord of this world and come back to Lowburn, you would never believe the patronizing airs they gave themselves, and what fun they made of the old people and of the old ways.

“Such guys !” or “cures !” or whatever the prevailing word of contempt might be. And this one was so soft, and that one so old-fashioned, and the whole place so dull and pokey and behind the time, and no girl of spirit or up-to-date would stand it for long together. But I have known some of these, who would have been glad to creep back to the old place

when the tinsel had worn off, and the worthless dross alone remained, and when they were drawing near to the dark valley leading to that day of reckoning which had seemed so far off when they first took service. They had a yearning to enter that valley from the dull, pokey, old-fashioned home rather than from the glare and noise of great Babylon, and to lie in the shade of the little high-shouldered, stumpy-towered church, which looked so motherly in dreams of lonely hearts far away, and whose little cracked bell sounded the same kindly tone of welcome as the old folks at home, bidding the wayfarers "Come in, and sit ye down. I be downright glad to see ye."

But Rob Chambers received no such welcome when, after getting down the hill in the anyhow fashion peculiar to old Joe, he made his way along the village street, past the church. He met no one in the transit, except one large white duck, which stood very tall on its yellow toes and flapped its wings at him, with an outburst of quacking, no doubt feeling that on him devolved the duty of keeping up Lowburn's high character for hospitality. Even when he turned in at the Vicarage gate, he found the whole place as deserted as the village.

The gate was open, as also was the front door and the windows, so that if any ill-conditioned person had happened that way, he could have taken his pick of all the Vicarage possessions, with no one to remonstrate but a robin, who, perched on one of the croquet hoops on the lawn, eyed Rob Chambers suspiciously. The fact was, he had been trying a

little burglary on his own account, and therefore suspected dishonest intentions in other people.

He had fluttered into the Vicar's study and perched impudently on the open pages of the sermon which was to admonish the Lowburn congregation on the morrow. I am afraid he found it dry, as other people occasionally did the good old Vicar's sermons; for he hopped off with an irreverent twitch of the tail, suggestive, if any one had been there to see, of the flippant behaviour of some of our smart young critics, who treat deep mysteries and grand old truths with as little ceremony and as sublime contempt as this pert little bird did the old Vicar's antiquated theology.

The kitchen he found a more promising field of operations, for much cutting of bread-and-butter had lately taken place on the table there, the remains of which, in inviting crumbs and buttery scraps, still lay on the cloth; and the heart under that smart red waistcoat must have beat high at the sight (robins' hearts, like boys', being situated in their stomachs), had not what might have been mistaken for a soft, stout, tabby cushion on the hearthrug, suddenly developed a slit of topaz eye, which made Mr. Robin all at once remember important business elsewhere and seek the dining-room, where a few biscuit-crums on the sideboard were a poor compensation for the dangerous plenty in the kitchen.

Rob Chambers likewise took a survey of the down-stair rooms, and then took Joe round into the stable-yard, which was likewise deserted both by man and

beast, and put him into one of the stalls of the empty stable, with such a feed of corn as Joe had not seen in all the poor hungry days of his hardworking life.

And then Rob took his way across the kitchen garden, and through a white gate in the clipped yew hedge into the hayfield. For, of course, the explanation of the deserted village and empty house was, that everyone was hay-making. It was Saturday, and there were signs of a change of weather: Lowburn signs, much more dependable than the weather forecasts in the paper, or barometrical readings — the aching of old Nanny Cook's limbs, and the convulsive braying of Master Miles' donkey, and the appearance of the little man, at the doorway of the small cottage, on the shelf at the Queen's Head, and the retirement of his wife from the corresponding doorway. And as there were these signs of a coming change, man, woman, and child, not occupied in other hayfields, turned out to carry the Vicar's hay, out of pure disinterested love, and not at all on account of the plentiful tea and bread-and-butter provided for all these volunteer workers, though such refreshment did not come amiss.

They would not have felt easy in their minds to let the parson's hay lie about through Sunday — and such a fine crop, too. The glebe meadow, "Parson's bit," as the people called it, was the best land in the parish; and the people felt a personal pride in the size of the rick that was made off it, and felt a sensation akin to indignation when any mishap reduced the amount or lessened the sweet value of it.

Old Nanny Cook had even been heard to express the sentiment that, "seeing as how it was the parson's," and in a way sacred, it would be quite excusable to finish off the last of it on Sunday morning, rather than that it should get spoilt by the rain. She hastened, however, to add for the benefit of the staring youngsters — aghast at the suggestion of such Sabbath breaking — that all other work was, of course, out of the question, and would infallibly be punished, as in the case of the man who gathered sticks on that day and was forthwith carried up to the moon, where he is to be seen to this day, and his dog, too, as a warning to irreligious children.

But as Rob Chambers passes through the kitchen garden and opens the white gate into the hayfield, I must ask the reader to look at him again, and then, if he will take the trouble to refer back to the description of him in the first chapter — for I do not want him to think that I have changed my tone abruptly, or that my courage has failed me at the prospect of conducting such a very unprepossessing hero through the ups and downs of my story. It is not so, dear reader ; it is only that in the first chapter I was looking at him with his father's eyes, cold and critical, through those gold-edged glasses, and now, as he comes out into the hayfield, I see him with a pair of blue eyes that looked at him from the top of a hay-cart, joggling slowly across to the rick in the corner. Curly hair has to be cleared away from before those blue eyes to see more plainly, and a very battered old straw hat pushed back ; and the little brown hand that was not

holding the heavy hayfork, had to shade them from the dazzle of the sun, before the owner of them called out in a clear, ringing, young voice —

“Why, it’s Rob! Rob, Rob, we thought you were never coming!”

You do not know, reader, or perhaps you do, what it is to look at the world from the top of a haycart, with the eyes of seventeen. It is such a beautiful world from that point of view, altogether a different sort of place to what we see plodding along the dusty ways of life, with our eyes turned inwards into that dreary, monotonous little plot of ground — ourselves. And so Bottom is transformed! you say. Yes, if you like to have it so, for it was the love in Titania’s eyes that turned the rough weaver, even with the donkey’s ears, into her “gentle joy.” And the same spell is working every day around us — wherever a mother gazes with rapture on a poor little red morsel of humanity, and thinks nothing has ever been created like it, though it is not a hundredth part as pretty and intelligent as a young pig.

As Rob appeared to those blue eyes, he was a very pleasant looking young fellow, tall and broad shouldered and long limbed, and his face was as bright and smiling as a midsummer sun; and if his mouth was wide, it was all the better for smiling with — a use for a mouth that Dr. Chambers did not take into account when he was reckoning up Rob’s defects.

“And he has awfully nice little eyes,” Kit used to say emphatically, when describing my hero; “they are as blue as that cornflower. Mine look regular

washed out, boiled gooseberries, by the side of them. And they're as clear as anything, and can't tell a lie if he tries. Don't you remember that day when he wouldn't say my nose was red, when it was? And he couldn't look me in the face, and I made him look me straight in my eyes, and then out came the truth with a pop, though it hurt him to say what he thought rude."

Well, her nose was not red to-day, except for the general warm sunburn over her soft, creamyskin; and if Rob had been called on to speak the truth about Kit's appearance, it would have been very pleasant truth, for she was looking as pretty as could be, though looks had not been taken into account at all. She had only a cotton frock, pinned back in a very unpromising style over a dark blue petticoat, and her sleeves turned up to her dimpled elbows, and a battered old hat, in the band of which a bunch of withered buttercups only added to the shabby, lopsided effect. You could not chop up Kit Brownlow into separate little squares and say this, that, or the other, was her principal charm, for they all fitted into one another, and could not be separated; but certainly, one of them was her utter absence of self-consciousness, and the simple spontaneity in everything she did, or said, or looked, and so you may be sure there was nothing of the pretty haymaker about her as a studied part, and if there was anything pretty about it, it was quite by accident.

Rob did not recognize, for the first minute or two, that the old man at the horse's head was the Vicar

himself, or that the horse was Dimple, the fat Vicarage pony, into whose stall Joe had found his way as into Paradise, and whose plentiful feed of corn was finding its way as fast as Joe's teeth could grind them, between those thin ribs of his.

Dimple, in spite of years and stoutness, had little ways and manners of his own only understood by his master, and in his heart of hearts felt a little aggrieved at being in a cart, and would have resented the ordinary cart-horse conversation, "gee whoop" and "whoa." And the Vicar, having tender consideration for the feeling of beast as well as man, consoled him with a hand on the rein and reasonable remarks, such as a horse of any education understands and appreciates.

It was not surprising that Rob did not recognize the Vicar without his coat, and with a red cotton handkerchief tucked into his shapeless grey felt hat, to protect the back of his neck from the sun's rays. And, I am afraid, that some of the clergy, in their irreproachable broadcloth and spotless linen, might have taken exception at his grey flannel shirt-sleeves, and have thought them unbecoming to his office, and his position altogether undignified.

But his own parishioners would have been quite surprised at any suggestion of the sort; and if he had chosen to go up into the pulpit in the same attire, they would have listened with the same ignorant respect and reverent inattention as they generally accorded him.

There were others of the Vicarage family here and

there about the field, gradually come upon and recognized by Rob in the course of his labours, for he was hard at work before he had been ten minutes there. There was Nellie, with abnormally long black legs which gave a certain bird-like appearance, heightened by a long neck and a habit of holding her head on one side, like a thrush listening for worms ; but on this occasion head and neck were hidden by a large lavender sun-bonnet, with a voluminous curtain that came down well over her shoulders.

There was Tibby, which (would anyone believe it?) is the short for Philip — short and stout and roundabout. And Christy, a dainty little Dresden china maiden of six, wielding the largest, heaviest rake to be found, and prettily patronizing and protecting baby Jack, who was told off to prevent Bogey, the Vicarage dog, from beginning tea prematurely, and who was discovered, I am sorry to say, asleep at his post of duty, and Bogey licking his lips suspiciously beside him.

Now you have the whole family: Kit and Nellie, Tibby, Christy and Jack — and the family is scarcely complete without reckoning Bogey, who was not to be overlooked, being a dog of much character and a mongrel of the purest breed.

CHAPTER III.

EDEN.

“ Ah ! years may come and years may bring
The truth that is not bliss.
But will they bring another thing
That can compare with this ? ”

CLOUGH.

MRS. BROWNLOW, or Madam, as the villagers called her, had died when Jack was born ; but her loss was not the overwhelming disaster that the death of a mother usually is in a family — more crushing, perhaps, as regards the children, than the loss of the father.

She was a gentle, colourless creature, who from bad health and general inefficiency, faded out of the active interests of life long before she actually passed away. She had been a good many years younger than her husband, who had always treated her as a child, and petted and humoured her, and the children took up the same line ; and Kit was quite motherly in her bearing as the feeble life drew to an end, and even little Tibby, only five when his mother died, would condescend in the funniest way to her weakness, and let her beat him in the simple games that even then seemed babyish to him, and would listen with exem-

plary patience to the little stories she would tell him in baby language, which he would have considered insulting from any one else.

They were all very loyal to her — and now that she was gone, they added all sorts of virtues, and sweetness, and charm, to their memory of her, and kept her grave always trim and gay with flowers; and taught little Jack tender little stories of what mother said and did, till he had a vision of her, like the sweet maiden mother in the Bible picture-book; and he cried when Nellie, in a thoughtless moment, showed him a photograph of her in a crinoline, with her hair in a chenille net, and leaning against a Corinthian column.

And in passing, do you not think, reader, that it would be as well if old photographs were burnt every four or five years?

Kit had begun to bear the keys of housekeeping at such an early age, that the burden of them did not weigh oppressively upon her when her mother's merely nominal share in household duties finally ceased; and moreover, these duties were much lightened by the presence in the house of nurse, who ruled them all — the Vicar included, with a rod of iron — and did the work of six, and was honest and trustworthy and devoted, and thoroughly disagreeable when she was cross or had the toothache. She and Kit always got on well together, for Kit and Jack were her special favourites — Kit having been her first baby, and Jack being her present one; added to which, Kit had never been the least bit afraid of her — such fearlessness being the surest protection against tyrants.

"She was always a daring little monkey," nurse used to say.

But Kit would come after her when none of the others ventured to come near her, so appalling was the grumpiness. She would worry and coax and perch herself on an unwilling knee, and forcibly turn round a very sour, displeased countenance, and force gloomy, frowning eyes to meet hers, which nurse resisted as long as she could, knowing that, when once she met Kit's sweet eyes, looking so sunny and coaxing, she would not be able to keep back that twitch at the corner of the mouth, which betrayed that she was vanquished, and which was generally followed by —

"There, Miss Kit, go along with you do, and don't hinder! And if you want a cake made for tea there ain't a minute to lose."

Nurse was cook, and most other things as well, in the Vicarage establishment: lady's maid, to brush Kit's silken curls; valet to the master; house parlour-maid, with a strong dash of the butler in pantry-work; "tweenie," whatever that mysterious domestic may be, whose name is beginning to creep into advertisements; but whatever the duties of a tweenie, I have no doubt nurse was capable of them. She was head gardener when old Fry had an attack of rheumatics, which, according to nurse, was closely connected with prolonged visits to the Queen's Head; and, by the way, she could preach a good practical sermon to the mind all the time she was rubbing in liniment to the body. She was occasionally coachman when Dimple had to be driven to meet the Vicar

at some outlying part of the parish ; and the poultry yard was almost entirely managed by her, even to the happy despatch of cocks and hens required for the Vicarage table ; and the children darkly suspected that she had a hand in the death of the pig, whose heart-rending cries roused them early one morning from their slumbers. She certainly superintended the cutting up, as if butchering had been a principal study and occupation all her life.

At the present moment nurse was head hay-maker, marshalling a row of rakers in a masterly way, as they raked up the hay into cocks out of the long windrows.

No gossiping was possible under nurse's Argus eyes, no pleasant pause at the end of a row to lean on their rakes, and exchange a few remarks and wipe hot foreheads. Still less to have unnecessarily frequent recourse to the stone bottle of beer, lying so temptingly under the elm, with blue and drab mugs all ready for use.

The Vicar's hospitable mind was a little disturbed by nurse's martinet treatment of the workers in the field, who, though inefficient, and including among their numbers the maimed, the halt, and the blind, were all of them volunteers, and came out of sheer good-will ; and he was rather relieved when it was necessary for her to go and see after the tea, which was a big function at the Vicar's hay-making.

"Though what good all them children do about the place," nurse said grudgingly, "I'm sure I don't know, nor some of the older folks neither. There's

that old Martha Tippetts, as ain't been inside the church not since last hay-making, and always the first after the beer, and puts down her rake before she've well begun." And so on, till nurse's grumblings died away in the distance.

Rob felt a little as if some of nurse's shafts were aimed at him, though he had been working with great diligence, and had refused to be beguiled by Tibby and Christy, who had found a young hawk, which returned their blandishments with such vigorous use of hooked beak and sharp spurs, that Tibby's fingers were much the worse for his treatment.

Tibby had to give up this ferocious, wild-eyed treasure to go in and assist nurse, being distinguished by nurse's preference as an *aide-de-camp* on such occasions, which was a great distinction, and imparted much importance and dignity to the short broad back and patched knickerbockers which went bustling off after nurse.

"Girls are such duffers," he explained to Rob, having called his attention to the exalted position he was called upon to fill; "and you see only me and nurse understand that boiler. If you don't look awfully sharp the water gets smoked, and nurse says it's not a bit of use trusting Annie — that's our new girl, you know — she's no more head than a pin; and she won't have Nellie inside the wash-house door ever since she nearly fell into the boiler reaching for something the other side."

Tibby took a personal pride in that tea, and sauntered from time to time round the big circle of tea-

drinkers to hear what they thought of it ; and he felt a little bit hurt when a third or even a fourth cup was declined, and wanted to know if it was not sweet enough, or what fault they had to find with it.

I am told that "to five o'clock" has become a received French verb, and does not at all depend on the hour at which it takes place, so that you may receive an invitation to come and five o'clock at half-past four. But at Lowburn, if such a solid square meal can be reckoned as afternoon tea, they five o'clocked at three. It was not a minute too soon for the tastes of the people, and the shade of the big elm tree was just large enough to take them all in, though before the last load was carried, it had crept right across to the yew hedge.

Rob had had no luncheon, so he was quite ready for it, and Tibby found him most satisfactory in his appreciation of the tea ; and Jack kept him well supplied with thick bread and butter and plum cake—that being Jack's special department—going round and round the circle with large dishes, followed closely by Bogey with an eye to the occasional avalanches of cake, which ensued when Jack's attention was distracted from the solemn necessity of keeping a strictly horizontal position with the dish.

Rob had been working with Kit all the time, raking after her in the long rows, tossing up the hay to her on the cart, or receiving it from her on the rick ; and now he was having tea luxuriously stretched at her feet, and the big fern frond she was using to drive off the flies was used for his

benefit as well, and occasionally for tickling his ears, which, as we know, were prominent features.

Nurse would not allow tea to be indefinitely prolonged, as some of the workers seemed to wish, but hurried them back to their work, making an exception, however, as regards the Vicarage family themselves.

"There ain't no call for you to work yourselves into such a heat, and Miss Nellie there safe for one of them bad headaches, if she don't take care; and there ain't no more than a good two hours' work if folks would just turn to and get through with it. So just you bide there till we've fetched up the further end, and then the sun will be off this side, and you'll be fresh to help in with the lave of it."

They were not loth to let themselves be persuaded; and the Vicar, even though not expressly addressed or included in nurse's advice or command, settled himself on the big cock which Tibby and Christy had specially heaped for his comfort. He was a little dozy with the heat and the soft purr of the wood-pigeons in the elm tree overhead, while just beyond him Nellie's black legs were all that was visible, to the naked eye, of that young lady, the rest of her being buried in hay; but they conveyed the impression of great rest, being crossed like the legs of crusaders on a tomb, and the crusading effect was heightened by Bogey asleep at her feet.

Christy and Tibby were much too absorbed in the young hawk to take any rest, and, moreover, I

do not think children between the ages of six and twelve ever go to sleep in the day-time unless they are ill ; but then they make up for it at night — and how they *do* sleep then !

Jack went from one to the other, assisting with the hawk till he got one fat finger pecked, when he retired, with rather a quivering under-lip, to sit on the hay above Nellie, till subterranean remonstrances and earthquakes dislodged him, when he took refuge with his father. Settling the grey felt hat at a less jaunty angle on the clerical head, removing spectacles from very sleepy eyes that certainly did not require their aid just at present, and trying them on his own very wide-awake round eyes, and snubby little nose ; and he was proceeding to burrow after the loudly ticking silver watch, which made its presence evident from some inner sanctuary, when Kit called him away.

Rob was lying flat on his back looking up among the great solid old branches of the elm tree, and the depth of green leaves through which here and there showed lakes of sapphire blue sky, and across the leafy coolness of which shot shafts of sunlight full of myriad insect life invisible in the shadows ; and one adventurous little ray found its way down between gnarled branches and thick foliage, right down on to Kit's bright head, from which she had taken the hat. I have said that Rob was staring up into the elm tree, but half the staring found its way to Kit's face, which bore his gaze as serenely as only perfect innocence, or perfect insolence could do.

Rob was not at all poetical or imaginative, as his father would freely have testified; but even to him there seemed something idyllic in lying there on the fragrant hay in the shade of that grand old tree, in which the wood-pigeons drowsily cooed, and to look up into Kit's face smiling so sweet and fair and kindly.

"Eden must have been something like this," he thought dreamily; "but in this Eden at Lowburn there's no serpent to upset all the jolliness."

And, just then, Tibby's shrill little voice piped out —

"I say, Kit, have you told Rob about Stuart Sinclair?"

CHAPTER IV.

EARLY DAYS.

"In all this world ne was ther non him like
To speke of phisike and ofurgerie —
He was a veray parfite practisour."

CHAUCER.

ROB CHAMBERS had made the acquaintance of the Brownlows when he was a small boy of six. He had had the measles or mumps, or something troublesome and infectious without being dangerous, and had been sent with his nurse to convalesce at a cottage on the shore near the coast-guard station on the coast, near the place where the little stream, to which Lowburn owes its name and its snug shelter scooped out of the wind-swept downs, dribbles ignominiously into the sea.

It was a hot summer that year, too, and Mrs. Brownlow was laid up with one of those long and tedious illnesses that preceded or succeeded the birth of most of her babies. Mr. Brownlow used to pull her chair down to the little bay, to get what air there was over the sea; and she would lie there, under a rough sort of tent he had constructed, till he came to bring her dinner, and to fetch her home in the cool of the evening.

It meant a good deal of heat and exertion for the Vicar, but he thought nothing of that as long as there was a little shade of pink in his wife's cheeks, and a little less heavy languor in her eyes. He used most days to bring down Kit, who, though only three at that time, was a very capable little person, and could fetch and carry and wait on her mother, and was to be reckoned on not to get into mischief, but to amuse herself in safe and reasonable ways.

Rob watched them from afar for the first day or two, and Mrs. Brownlow rather resented his presence in the bay, which she had grown to consider her own private property. But Kit was a sociable creature, and soon made friends with the staring, round-eyed boy with big ears sticking out; and after that he became her devoted slave, and for her amusement dug holes or built castles or caught little crabs, or made small boats and sailed them in the great green pools among the rocks.

By-and-by he was promoted to assisting with the chair, and being a strong-built, sturdy little fellow, his help to get the chair up the steep little path from the beach was really a perceptible assistance, and not the fly-on-the-wheel business that Kit's was, though she set her teeth and pushed and struggled, and put all her baby strength into it, and arrived at the top very hot and out of breath, but triumphant at having helped "fader."

And when a wet day came, and Mrs. Brownlow did not go down to the shore, and Kit was pitying "boy," as she called him, for being all alone with

that nice little boat that he had nearly finished the day before, "boy" suddenly appeared before the Vicarage windows, dripping and red-faced, and inclined to hide when he was observed, and to run away when the Vicar went out to bring him in.

But he was caught and handed over to nurse to be dried, and he reappeared in an extraordinary costume of an old coat of the Vicar's and a red flannel petticoat of his wife's, while his own garments dried before the kitchen fire. Mrs. Brownlow laughed so much at his appearance that she forgot all about her own ailments for ever so long, and was all the better for it — for it is wonderful how ailments grow by contemplation.

Having once found his way to the Vicarage, Rob spent a good part of his time there, when Mrs. Brownlow and Kit did not come down to the shore; and as the maid, who was supposed to be in charge of him, was carrying on a very interesting flirtation with one of the coastguards, she had no objection to Rob being amused and looked after by other people.

From time to time Dr. Chambers paid a perfunctory visit to see how his son was getting on, duly notifying his coming to Sarah beforehand, being too wise a man to pop down unexpectedly on any of his domestics, and place them at an unfair disadvantage.

So, accordingly, he always found Rob in a spotlessly clean suit and collar, and with smooth hair, and Sarah mending one of his stockings sitting in the porch, as if there was not a coastguard within a hundred miles.

Dr. Chambers was not, of course, taken in by this little scene ; but there was never any deception about Rob, and his robust health and earnest wish to stop at the bay was evident to the most casual glance. As Dr. Chambers was not consumed with anxiety to have the child home, he was well contented to let his stay run on indefinitely till well into the autumn ; so that the friendship between Kit and Rob was firmly established by the time he went back to Seadown.

The next year he came again but did not stay so long, as another coastguard had arisen who knew not Sarah ; and that young person discovered that Lowburn Bay was a horrid, dull place, and “ them coastguard fellows ” a low set, and their wives “ trumpery — such as no respectable girl could have anything to do with.” And she kept up a persistent small agitation till they were recalled home, in spite of Rob’s protestations.

And the next year, so great an influence have servants on the affairs of life, though we do not always recognize it, Rob would not have gone at all, and perhaps he and Kit might have met no more, had not Mr. Brownlow invited him to the Vicarage.

The Vicar had brought his wife over to Seadown to consult Dr. Chambers, whose medical reputation had spread even to Lowburn ; and he might have gone back without in any way connecting the suave, elegantly-mannered doctor, who conveyed so little hope or comfort in such honeyed words, with the blunt, plain, little boy with big ears and staring

truthful eyes, had not Rob himself appeared on the scene.

He came blundering out of the dining-room just as the Brownlows were being shown out, though it was altogether forbidden to be in the way when patients were entering or leaving the consulting-room.

Mr. and Mrs. Brownlow were in that uncertain state which sometimes follows an interview with the doctor. The sentence had been pronounced in such ambiguous though elegant terms, and with such a smiling and utterly expressionless face, that they were each waiting to see how the other took it, before giving way to hope or despair.

Mrs. Brownlow was nervously twisting the prescription in her fingers, and her husband feeling in his waistcoat pocket, where a guinea had been a few minutes before, which was there no longer.

But Rob's appearance distracted their minds from hope or fear.

"I never see that boy," Mrs. Brownlow said, "without remembering how ridiculous he looked that day in your old coat and my petticoat."

Rob was so unfeignedly pleased to see them — his feelings were always unfeigned and not very quietly expressed — that Dr. Chambers opened his consulting-room door to see the cause of the commotion, and found Rob with one arm round Mrs. Brownlow and the other holding her husband's arm and pressing them to come in and have tea: a rough-and-ready meal that had just been brought in on a tray, with a cup of weak, sloppy tea, and a plate of very

thick bread and butter — a very different meal to the dainty afternoon tea with which Dr. Chambers occasionally regaled his lady patients.

“Rob !” said Dr. Chambers in astonishment.

He disliked the abbreviated name intensely, but circumstances — which in this case, as in many others, mean servants — were too strong for him, and he had to relinquish Robert as a bad job.

Rob’s arms at once dropped to his sides, and his eager, hospitable tongue stopped its persuasions. His mouth was silenced in the middle of a word, remaining half open.

Mr. Brownlow hastened to explain that they had made Rob’s acquaintance at Lowburn Bay, and that he and their little girl were great friends.

“And Kit will be looking out for us,” he went on to Rob ; “and she won’t have tea till we come, so we must make haste home. Won’t you let your boy come over and stay with us a bit ?” he said to the doctor, “as he tells us that he is not coming to the bay this year. Lowburn is a very quiet, out-of-the-way place, but we will take good care of him.”

“Thanks very much,” said the doctor ; “it is too good of you to propose such a thing, but ——”

“We should like him to come. Good-bye, Rob, I shall tell Kit you are coming.”

Dr. Chambers bowed them out with many courteous expressions of thanks and adieu, while Rob stood with his mouth open and his hands in his pockets, without a word.

But just as Mr. Brownlow was driving out of Sea-

down in the seedy old four-wheeler they had borrowed for the afternoon, the boy came running breathless and bareheaded after them.

“I say,” he panted, “write to him and say you want me to come, or he won’t let me. You do want me to come, don’t you? And it’s not humbug, like it is when he asks people to dinner and says, ‘Thank goodness!’ when they refuse.”

And as they drove home through the gathering dusk, Mr. Brownlow, as is the manner of good men, thought less of the want of sincerity in the doctor, patent even to his young son — for “to his own Master he standeth or falleth,” — than of his own life and conduct, lest little Kit should ever feel that about him. Surely it would be better that a millstone were round his neck and he drowned in the deep of the sea than that he should offend one of God’s little ones — little Kit with her great truthful, trustful eyes.

CHAPTER V.

AN INTRODUCTION.

"We live together day by day,
And some chance look or tone
Lights up with instantaneous ray
An inner world unknown."

LORD HOUGHTON.

SINCE then Rob's visits to Lowburn Vicarage had been frequent, and for one pleasant six months before he went to school, he was there as a pupil, and learnt more in those six months than he ever did before or since.

But the Vicar had not sufficient confidence in his own powers to undertake Rob's further instruction, and the doctor had not at that time relinquished all his hopes for Rob's future or become resigned—as he was at the time my story begins—to his son's invincible ignorance; so perhaps, he lost the one chance there might have been of overcoming that ignorance by Mr. Brownlow's kind and patient, and, no doubt, somewhat muddling method.

But never a holiday time passed without Rob finding his way frequently over to Lowburn; so it is no wonder that he knew his way so well that hot mid-summer day, and took up his position so easily as one of the Vicarage family in the hay-field.

But having brought up Rob's friendship with the Brownlows to the present date, I must go back to Tibby's remarks about Stuart Sinclair.

Whether it was the name occurring just as Rob was comparing Lowburn to Eden — with this advantage to the latter that it had no serpent — or whether it was the sibilant sound of the name, I do not know, but Stuart Sinclair was curiously associated in Rob's mind with the serpent who worked our first parents such deadly ill. And then, too, when the fern-leaf, which fell suddenly on to Rob's face when Tibby spoke, had been raised, and Rob could see Kit's face again, there was an odd little look on it, which Rob, in all his staring experience, had never seen on it — a little, conscious, shy look that was very pretty, but that Rob did not altogether admire, he could not tell why.

"Oh yes, Rob; I was going to tell you about a visitor that's coming to see us. We haven't had any one to stay in the house for such a long time, I feel quite frightened. And Nurse is in such a fuss about the spare bedroom, though I dare say in California they don't have everything so very elegant, and get on very well without toilette muslins and bath cloths."

"California?"

"Yes, that's where he's coming from. Christy and Jack and I have been doing California for the geography lesson ever since the letter came; for they hadn't an idea where it was, and I was not so very sure, and Tibby thought it was one of the Roman emperors."

Rob laughed derisively at the idea, though he was not very much the wiser.

"But who is he?"

"You didn't know that we had an uncle out there, did you?"

"Oh-h-h!" — with much undefined relief from Rob, there being a harmless sound about that relationship.

"Uncle Philip, you know. Tibby's named after him."

"But I thought you said the name was Stuart something?"

"So it is. It isn't Uncle Philip himself that's coming, but a friend of his."

"Uncle Philip wrote a long letter about him," put in Tibby, "and ——"

"We never heard about Uncle Philip," Kit rather hastily interrupted, "because, you know, I fancy he had been rather a trouble to father in the old days before I can quite remember."

Kit lowered her voice and glanced across at the Vicar; but she might have spared herself the precaution, for he was having a nice, little nap, and was quite out of reach of the conversation going on on the neighbouring haycock.

"I don't quite know what it was; but Nurse says he was unfortunate about money, and poor mother was ill, and there were the babies to be thought of. Nurse says he was a very nice sort of gentleman and very fond of children, and he took a great deal of notice of me; and I almost think I can remember a

little about it, but I'm not quite sure. But, at last, he went quite away and no letters came from him; and father was anxious about him and worried more than he did, even when Uncle Philip was always coming to ask his help. And then, after a few years, father heard from him from California, just a few lines, saying he was settled there for the present, but did not know if he should stay. And then nothing more, though father wrote several times, till a few days ago, when he wrote and said that he was on his way home, but had been taken ill at New York; and though he was better and hoped soon to be well enough to continue his journey, he was giving an introduction to a friend of his, Stuart Sinclair, who was coming to England, and would arrive very soon after we got the letter, and he would come to Lowburn and give us all his news."

"And he said," burst in Tibby, interrupted again by Kit.

"Uncle Philip says he was not well enough to write at any length, but that Mr. Sinclair will tell all about him. We think from the letter—father and I think," Kit went on, sagely, "that he has been getting on better, as he does not say a word about any help, and he writes from some big hotel, and as if he were being well cared for. But we shall hear all about it when this friend of his comes. But I say!" Kit exclaimed, jumping to her feet, "how lazy we are! and there is another load coming up from the end of the meadow."

"Yes, to be sure, my dear," responded the Vicar,

with much liveliness. "I wasn't asleep, though I dare say you thought so, but only resting my eyes — the sun dazzles them a little. I could hear all you were talking about. But you must tell Rob about the visitor we are expecting. It's quite an event for us, you know — and a visitor from America, too. Why," at sight of broad grins from his disrespectful family, "have you been telling him about Stuart Sinclair? Then I must have dozed off for a minute, after all."

"Tibby," said Kit, "fly across and help with Dimple. He's showing off airs and graces."

But Tibby was not going to be done out of imparting the piece of information he had been trying to edge in every time Kit paused. So he fell behind, to give Rob his hay-fork, and took the opportunity to tell him.

"Do you know what Uncle Philip said about this Stuart Sinclair? Why, that he was a very nice, young fellow, and would make a good husband for Kit. Fancy — what a lark — Kit having a young man! She gets into a regular rage at the idea, and says it's all a pack of nonsense; but you see, Rob, Kit's getting on now — and she's not bad looking," with the disparaging air of a brother; "and many girls of her age have young men. There's Bessie Jones, who's not as old as Kit, and has an awful squint ——"

But just then Kit made a speaking-trumpet of her two little brown hands, and shouted to Rob to come and help at the rick, guessing the purport of Tibby's interesting communication to Rob, which produced a

heightened colour in that youth, and a furtive, wistful look in the eyes that followed Kit so persistently.

"Don't you wish," Tibby said, the next time he came across Rob, in the course of their labours — "don't you wish that fellow Sinclair would turn up this evening, so that you could have a look at him?"

No answer was, happily, necessary to this question, as the hay-cart passed on with Tibby on the top — out of reach of a reply; for, honestly, Rob wished that that fellow Sinclair should never turn up at all, and he might have blurted out this ill-natured desire, and surprised Tibby, who would have been altogether unable to understand the reason for it.

But although Tibby's fervent wish that Stuart Sinclair should make his appearance at Lowburn that evening was not gratified exactly, Rob, curiously enough, made his acquaintance before next day dawned, though it was outside the limits of his Eden, Lowburn, that he found the serpent, if serpent Stuart Sinclair was.

The Vicar's hay was carried triumphantly by sunset, and, though the sky was crimson from west to east, and, as is well known "the red sky at night is the shepherd's delight," and betokens fine weather on the morrow, the great green rick-cloth was drawn over the fragrant, substantial rick, so that there might be no ill-feeling against Providence, if any of the Lowburn folk woke in the night, which was not likely, as they were all so tired, and heard the rain patter down on the tiles.

The moon was rising over the edge of the down





when all was done, and they gave three cheers for the Vicar, and sang the evening hymn, before they went away. I am afraid Nurse sang the lines —

“Sleep that may me more vigorous make,
To serve my God when I awake,”

rather pointedly at Martha Tippetts, who was certainly remiss in attending church.

And then the Vicarage party went across the shaven meadow, where the dew was gathering thickly, with Nurse hurrying on ahead to get the supper ready. Kit and Nellie had each one of the Vicar's arms. He was tired, though he would not own it; and Tibby and Christy had linked on to Nellie, while Rob, carrying Jack on his back, walked beside Kit, who put her hand on his arm to make the line complete. And thus they straggled slowly across the meadow in pleasant, friendly fashion, till the wicket in the yew hedge broke up the line, and they could see the light shining from the dining-room window, and supper was nearly ready, with the magic that Nurse was able to wield when she did what she called “striking a bustle.”

And, after supper, Rob set off on his ride home on old Joe, who was quite skittish after his unusually good meal and with the prospect of going home, though the home was not one for which any one else would have cared much. And, by the way, reader, how wonderful that home feeling is, in man and beast—a poor, damp, back kitchen, with dirt and starvation, is a “little 'ome,” very bitter to give up to

go to the work-house infirmary, which, to an unprejudiced eye, belonging, it is unnecessary to say, to a person who has not to go there, appears comfort and luxury. And how a poor, starved, ill-treated cat will go back miles, sometimes, to a place where she has never had any kindness, and is by no means welcome.

So old Joe wagged his stump of a tail, and jogged bravely along in the moonlight, and even got up enough spirit to shy at the black shadow cast over the road by a ragged furze bush.

There was no other wayfarer along the lonely road till Rob came in sight of the lights of Seadown, and then it was mostly of the Saturday-night order — men making a devious way home with greatly diminished week's wages in their pockets, and uncertainty as to which side of Rob and his steed they would pass.

But it was not among these that Rob lighted on Stuart Sinclair, but on his return home, after safely bestowing Joe in the dilapidated shed which served him for a stable.

Hearing voices in the dining-room, and smelling the unaccustomed odour of tobacco in the air, he concluded that his father had some friend with him, and debated whether he would not go straight up to bed ; but, on second thoughts, went into the dining-room, dusty and rough and unkempt from his long ride.

"Well, if you want to hear all about the Brownlows, here's the very man for you. Rob, this is Mr. Stuart Sinclair."

CHAPTER VI.

GOOD COMPANY.

"His eyes full of merry simplicity, his words of hearty companionableness." — SIDNEY.

STUART SINCLAIR was a tall, slight man, whose cleanly-shaven face made him at first sight look younger than he was, and a casual observer might have set him down almost as a boy — and a good-looking boy too.

It was these good looks that Rob objected to most in him, and an easy assurance of manner that Rob grudgingly owned was very attractive.

He seemed to have already established himself in Dr. Chambers' good graces to an extent unparalleled in Rob's experience, seeing that it had carried him so far as to allow of smoking in the dining-room. If he had been ugly, and awkward, and middle-aged, Rob would have received him with open arms, and undertaken to escort him over to Lowburn with the greatest pleasure in life.

But from the very first view of him, through the delicate curls of smoke, lying back in an indolent, careless attitude in the armchair, and turning a smiling, interested face towards the new-comer, Rob was convinced that the man was exactly what Kit would

admire ; and Tibby's confidences and Kit's efforts to restrain them, came back painfully into his mind.

And the more he unwillingly admired the man, and the unstudied grace of his movements, and his pleasant, genial manner — with just a sufficient touch of deference to Dr. Chambers — and his ready, frank laugh, so much the more awkward and uncouth and silent did Rob become, sitting clumsily on the edge of a chair near the door, painfully conscious of his dusty boots and limp shirt collar, out of which the hay-making had taken all the starch, and of bits of hay adhering to his hair and coat, and of his big red hands not over clean. He was aware, too, of his father's critical eye noticing all these details, and comparing them with the stranger — who was certainly a striking contrast in every particular.

“Mr. Sinclair wants to hear about Mr. Brownlow and his family,” Dr. Chambers said. “Mr. Sinclair, it appears, became acquainted with a brother of Mr. Brownlow's in California, travelled part of the way home with him, and promised him to come and look up his relations, as the old gentleman is detained at New York by illness.”

“Oh !” said Rob.

He could not for the life of him think of anything to say, and he knew he looked very idiotic, and could hear the irritability in his father's tone as he went on.

“I have been telling Mr. Sinclair that you know them quite well, and can tell him all about them.”

“Yes,” said Bob, with his eyes wildly roving round

the room in search of some intelligent remark, which was not to be extracted, however, from the gilt cornice over the window, or the big engraving of one of Landseer's pictures on the wall.

He wished, desperately, that he had stuck to his first intention of going straight up to bed, or that some excuse would offer itself for bolting out of the room — even the schoolboy excuse of nose-bleeding presenting itself to his perturbed mind.

But the stranger himself came to the rescue with a kindness that Rob appreciated while he resented it.

"It's rather a large order, isn't it, to be called upon to tell all you know about any one? But Dr. Chambers tells me they are great chums of yours; and the old gentleman over there did not seem to know much about them, not even how many there were of them."

I do not think, if Rob had been paid for it he could have said right off, at that moment, how many Brownlows there were; and while he was stammering over it, and trying to count up on his fingers on the arm of the chair, beginning with Kit and never getting any further, his father intervened irritably —

"Their name is legion, apparently, as is the case with the families of most country parsons; and the poorer they are, the more children. The mother died a year or two ago, and I fancy there is a grown-up daughter, or nearly grown up."

"Oh," said Sinclair, "the old gentleman told me about her: Kitty, or Katie, or something, isn't she called?"

And then Rob's voice suddenly came back to him,

rather loud and abrupt and startling, causing Dr. Chambers' eyebrows to elevate themselves, and a twinkle to come into Sinclair's eyes, and a funny, little twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"Miss Brownlow is called Kit at home, and she is quite grown up. And, besides her, there are four: Ellen and Philip and Christina and —— John."

It sounded, even to himself, so ridiculous to catalogue them by these very unusual names, that he could hardly resist smiling; and when it came to John — that fat, inconsequent dumpling, who rolled about with Bogey on such very equal terms, and had no dignity to speak of — being called by such a solid and sensible name, he nearly broke down and laughed outright.

"The old gentleman used to talk of Kit — I beg her pardon, Miss Brownlow," Sinclair interrupted himself with a little deprecatory nod to Rob, which provoked a chuckle from the doctor — "as quite a little girl; but I expect he had forgotten the flight of time, and, of course, I knew nothing about it. But he always spoke of her as a child, and, I fancy, if he had sent her a present, it would have been a doll."

"Well, my good fellow," said the doctor, "I can only say that this is the first time I have ever heard of Miss Brownlow. It has only been Kit heretofore, and, indeed, I used to think it was a boy, when Kit's doings used to be dinned into my ears. Did they ever mention this uncle of theirs in California, Rob?"

"Not till to-day," Rob answered. "I never heard of him before."

"No," said Sinclair; "I fancy from what he told me that he had been down on his luck, and his relations had turned the cold shoulder on him."

"It's not like Mr. Brownlow to turn the cold shoulder on any one because they're poor."

The doctor laughed. "You see, Sinclair, the Brownlows have a tremendous partisan here, so you had better mind what you say about them."

The stranger gave a little deprecating shrug, and, through the light curls of smoke, his eyes looked keenly at Rob, who certainly was a curious sight—having grown very red as he blurted out his defence of Mr. Brownlow, and having rubbed up his hair on end with a nervous movement he had when he was more than usually awkward and embarrassed.

"I haven't anything to say about them," Sinclair said, "because I don't know anything. The old man talked of 'Miss Brownlow'"—with a slight hesitation before the name—"as a little girl; and of his brother as a good sort, and that's about all I know of them. But I shall run over on Monday and make their acquaintance; for I shall have to write and report to the old gentleman, or, anyhow, tell him all about them when I go back."

"Is he likely to come home himself?"

"Well, he talks of it; but this illness of his I was telling you of has taken a lot out of him, though he has plenty of pluck, and won't give in if he can help it."

"Has he done pretty well out there?" asked the doctor.

Sinclair was lighting a fresh cigarette, so did not answer quite directly.

"That depends on what you call well."

"Oh, I know the time has gone by for making big fortunes out there. Men don't come home with their pockets stuffed with bank-notes, or their portman-teaux with nuggets."

Sinclair got up from his armchair, with a half-suppressed yawn, and a stretch of his long arms.

"I think I'll be making tracks, as the Yankees say, for my hotel. To tell you the truth, sir, I'm a bit fagged with those few days in London. Civilization comes fatiguing when you're not used to it. If you'll allow me, I'll look you up again to-morrow, and perhaps your son will put me in the way of getting over to Lowburn."

The doctor had lost that youthful agility of mind, even if he had ever possessed it, of leaping easily from one subject to another, and his thoughts were still running on the fortunes that used to be made in the old days by emigrants.

"I suppose, nowadays, the only chance of making a pile is if you happen to —— What is the expression? 'Strike ile.' Oh, never mind, it does not the least signify!"

For a sudden movement of Sinclair's, as the doctor spoke these last words, which sounded oddly to Rob on the dignified lips of his father, had upset a small table close by, on which a glass was standing, which was smashed to atoms in its fall.

"It really does not matter. The maid will sweep

it up directly. Good night. Good night. Very pleased to have seen you. Look in any time tomorrow. Good night to you."

What a well-knit figure it was that Rob's grudging eyes watched along the esplanade, under the lamps, with the dark, tossing sea behind him. But the face that looked away across the sea to where the flashing light of a lighthouse showed and disappeared, and showed again as you watched it, had a curious hard look on it, that took away all the effect of youth that had struck you at first sight.

CHAPTER VII.

SUNDAY.

"Does not divide the Sunday from the week."

SHAKESPEARE.

STUART SINCLAIR had brought a letter of introduction from a doctor at New York, whose acquaintance Dr. Chambers had made some years ago, and this letter Stuart had presented that afternoon. Something about him had so taken the doctor's fancy that he had invited him to dine that evening, and had even sanctioned that hitherto unheard-of indulgence in the sacred precincts of the dining-room — cigarettes.

He was an amusing companion, and had travelled and seen the world; and Dr. Chambers was just then suffering from the feeling of the entirely local character of the people with whom he had to do.

Of course, it was very much more satisfactory to have a large practice among the country gentry and the residents; but sometimes Dr. Chambers thanked his stars that he lived at a watering-place, small and insignificant as it was, to which visitors came from London and various parts of England, and even — as in the case of the New York doctor, whose letter Stuart Sinclair had brought — from another hemisphere, people whose ideas were not bounded by

a five-mile radius of Seadown, and who could talk of something besides the state of the road or the rates or some threadbare piece of local gossip.

No doubt many of these in whom Dr. Chambers found relief from the gentry of Seadown and its vicinity, were quite as local as those of whom the doctor complained ; but their locality was not the locality that had become stale to him with the wear and tear of everyday life, and their limitations did not touch his limitations, even at their outside edge ; so that to get a peep into other people's interests, however small, was a refreshing change.

But Stuart Sinclair was more unlimited still. He did not seem to have any special locality, but to have been everywhere and seen everything ; and yet he did not bore you with his experiences, but was able to listen as well as to talk, and to be interested as well as interest.

He even seemed to have dabbled a bit in medical science, and to have got so far as to understand intelligently what Dr. Chambers said, without having acquired that little knowledge, which is such a dangerous thing, by making its owner think that he knows all about the subject, when he is really only standing on the threshold, not having even reached that vestibule leading to the temple of knowledge — consciousness of one's own ignorance.

Perhaps Stuart had attained to that vestibule, for he listened with great deference to Dr. Chambers' opinions, and thereby convinced that gentleman of his superior intelligence.

Now, if Rob had been such an one as this, Dr. Chambers thought more than once, that evening, what a difference it might have made ! A son who would have been interested in his experiments, who would have thrown himself with ardour into his pursuits would have been something to live for, something to save for and spend on, something to stir up the old enthusiasm which had been dying out under Rob's utter want of sympathy and appreciation.

And then, Sinclair was such a pleasant-mannered, distinguished-looking fellow — a little bit, the doctor thought, what he himself had been at that age : the sort of young fellow he would have been proud to take about and introduce to his better sort of patients, and who would soon have made his way in society.

And then, in came Rob, dusty, unkempt, awkward, boorish, brusque with Sinclair, and taking up the cudgels with clumsy touchiness, most unnecessarily, in defence of his friends at Lowburn, before a word had been said against them.

It must be allowed that the doctor was a sorely-tried man, and it is no wonder that, when Sinclair was gone, he took himself off to his study, with only a curt nod of good night to Rob.

One of the influences brought to bear on Rob by his friends at Lowburn, was church-going on Sunday. He remembered Kit's look of horrified surprise when he told her he did not go to church, and her inquiry why he did not go with his father ? and her almost incredulous wonder when he told her that his father never went either.

“Are you sure, Rob,” she said — “quite sure? Perhaps he goes without your knowing it. I know old Martin used to go every Sunday to the meeting-house at Stoneborough, and none of his family knew anything about it. I don’t mean, of course,” she hastened to add, “that Dr. Chambers is likely to go to chapel; but, perhaps, it is to another church he goes on Sunday mornings?”

But Rob, anxious as he was to appease the disapproving look in Kit’s eyes, was obliged, by that troublesome truthfulness of which Kit spoke in a previous chapter, to confess that breakfast was later on Sunday. The bells had generally stopped before the doctor got up from the breakfast-table, and, gathering up his letters and newspapers, went into the consulting-room, from which he emerged, when the brougham came to the door at twelve, extra well shaved, and with his Sunday coat on, which was, as far as Rob knew, his only recognition of the day.

Rob used to be taken to church at one time, when he had a serious nurse, and used to swing short legs from what then appeared a dangerously high seat, off which he once fell with a hideous crash when he had gone to sleep in the sermon. But the serious nurse was succeeded by a more light-minded one, with friends on the beach, so Rob’s church-going was not kept up or renewed till he came to Lowburn Bay, and became acquainted with the Brownlows; and then going to church meant sitting by Kit, in her clean, starched white frock, and having the places in the Prayer-book — in which she was better instructed

than he — pointed out by a finger in a white glove, a size too large for it, which caused a fold at the top, obscuring the first words of the passage in question.

It soon came to mean too going to dinner at the Vicarage, and playing quiet, little Sunday games with Kit in the garden afterwards, and then going to church again, and perhaps tea to follow. So with all these advantages attached to going to church, anybody would have been glad to do so.

But at Seadown church-going was very different. To go by yourself, or with an unwilling maid ; to be shown by the pew-opener in a white cap to a conspicuous seat, close by that in which Miss Peck's young ladies' school sat — horrid, staring, little girls, quite a different creation from Kit — girls who detected with little, sharp eyes that he was holding the Prayer-book upside down, or looking for " Dearly beloved brethren " in the Psalms, and who tittered and nudged one another in a manner unendurable to a sensitive person of the masculine gender.

But after Kit's reproachful surprise at his confession of not going to church, even Miss Peck's young ladies could not prevent him, or his father's raised eyebrows, or the late breakfast, or the various small obstacles that the maids threw in the way, till they established the fact that they were not expected to accompany him ; and he even appeared at church one Sunday with well-developed mumps, to the great indignation of the rest of the congregation.

Dr. Chambers had not attended church since the first year or two of his residence at Seadown. He

found that his practice did not demand the sacrifice, that, first of all, his absence could be accounted for by the arduous nature of his professional duties, and that afterwards a cheque now and then for parochial charities made it all right with the Vicar. And when, by-and-by, some of his lady patients began to shake their heads and express fears about his religious state, it did not cost him many patients, as there is an unconfessed feeling, even in the most sincerely religious people, that want of faith is generally combined with great intellectual powers.

“Of course, my dear,” Miss Hodges would say — and Miss Hodges was one of the pillars of the church at Seadown — “it is very pleasing to see Mr. Johnson so regular at church, and all his little girls; but I think poor dear Maria would have died if we had not called in Dr. Chambers when we did. And though, poor man, he suffers from doubts himself, it is plain he is bringing up his son very carefully, as that boy is always in his place on Sunday; only I wish he would not go to sleep in the sermon, and snore — it is so distracting!”

So Rob’s presence at church was reckoned a credit to his father, as was also the boy’s presenting himself as a candidate for confirmation, though his unparalleled ignorance on doctrinal matters caused the Vicar great searchings of heart.

So, this Sunday, when Stuart Sinclair came in the morning, he found the doctor alone again, Rob being at church; and, the Vicar’s sermon being longer than usual that day, when Rob came in he found that his

father and Mr. Sinclair had driven over to Lowburn, and left a message that he need not wait lunch for them.

It was such a beautiful day, there was not the slightest necessity for that cloth over the Vicar's hay-rick. They need not have been in such a hurry to carry the hay on Saturday ; it might have lain safely in cocks, and had an extra drying in the full, bright sunshine, if it had required any more. And there was more air than the day before, a nice brisk breeze that caught the tops of the little waves and just tipped them with white, and made little eddies of dust on the road.

So it was nothing to be very much astonished at, that the doctor should have offered to drive Mr. Sinclair over to Lowburn, especially if he had any patients in that direction. But still, often as Rob had gone that way, it had never even been suggested that the doctor should drive him, however beautiful the day or amiably disposed the doctor.

Rob imagined their arrival at Lowburn, perhaps just at the time of the early dinner, and the Vicar's and Kit's kindly hospitality ; and he wondered what his father, who was fastidious and particular about his food, would think of the simple fare, that always seemed to Rob so singularly nice and appetising — the great big dishes of vegetables, and the vast gooseberry puddings. He was desperately afraid that his father might think it disgusting.

He hardly touched the luncheon that was brought up for him, so engrossed was he in imagining what

was occurring at Lowburn ; and I am afraid that the mental and moral nourishment provided for him at the afternoon service received as little attention as the dish of cutlets, which the cook sent up anyhow, because it was "only Master Rob, and he doesn't notice."

His mind principally dwelt on what his father would think of them, and after that, on what Kit would think of Stuart Sinclair ; and if he could have found one thing about Sinclair, that he was quite sure Kit would not like, he would have felt far happier. He searched anxiously in his memory for the things about which Kit had expressed her likes or dislikes in people, and especially in the few men who had come into her sphere of observation. But Kit's likes were much more extensive than her dislikes, and alas ! many of her likings fitted in with Sinclair's peculiarities.

He felt a little easier in his mind when it was half-past two — the hour at which Kit and Nellie, and even Christy now, went off to the Sunday school, and the Vicar began to fidget in and out of his study with a list of hymns and chants, and his notes for the catechizing. Visitors would surely take their leave then, or, if they remained, would be left to their own devices, or to the entertainment of Tibby and Jack.

But Rob had been home from afternoon service some time before Doctor Chambers appeared, and then he came by himself.

"Look here, Rob," he said. "I wish you'd just step round to the George, and tell them to send a man with Sinclair's traps across to Lowburn. They would not hear of his coming away. It seems they

have been expecting him some time, and it was nonsense for him to come all the way back here to-night, just to go over again to-morrow, though I must say I should have been glad of his company. I have not come across such good company for a long time. The old parson there took to him at once, and so did the girl. He seemed quite one of the family before I came away. And, by the way, Rob, what a nice-looking girl that Miss Kit of yours has grown into. Sinclair was quite smitten, I tell you. I fancy he has made some money out in California, though he is not forward to talk of it, and I like him all the better for that ; so little miss over there might do worse, if she takes his fancy."

Poor Rob !

CHAPTER VIII.

STRAWBERRIES.

"Dr. Boteler said of strawberries, Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did."

IZAAC WALTON.

THE worst of coming in contact with a very congenial companion is, that it makes others seem almost more uncongenial than they really are ; and the few days after Sinclair's visit, Rob trod on his father's toes at every turn, all the more so as Rob was heavy and displeased, and did not take any trouble, which at the best of times was unavailing, to propitiate his father.

It was rather a slack time for Dr. Chambers. The visitors had not begun to arrive at Seadown. There was a notice of apartments to let up in nearly every window along the esplanade ; and in the country round, the season was undoubtedly healthy — a blessing for which it requires great heroism in a doctor to be thankful.

The scientific work in which he was engaged had reached a point requiring costly research, undisturbed devotion of time, and intelligent collaboration, if it was to be what Dr. Chambers once fondly pictured, the book of medical science of the present generation and a text-book for future ages.

Costly research would not square with his income and with some unlucky investments which he had made. Undisturbed time was not obtainable by a general practitioner, liable, at the most crucial moment of an experiment, or an elaborately worked out argument, to be summoned to a baby with the hiccups or an old man stupid with drink.

And as for intelligent collaboration, Dr. Chambers looked at Rob and groaned.

Rob, on his side, was suffering a purgatory of anxiety to know what was going on at Lowburn, and yet declaring to himself that wild horses should not drag him in that direction as long as that fellow Sinclair was there.

It was certainly not wild horses that did the deed two days later — for wild is the last adjective any one would apply to Joe, who was tameness itself, and was more used to be dragged himself than to drag any one. The only violence required to set Rob travelling along the road to Lowburn, with a much brighter face than his father had seen that week, was a postcard from Kit.

“Won’t you come and pick strawberries? — KIT.”

So Joe was requisitioned again, and off Rob set, pretty nearly forgetting all about Stuart Sinclair, or if he remembered him, snapping his fingers mentally at his handsome person and attractive manners, since these had not made Kit forget her old friend, or dispense with his services over the strawberry beds.

Strawberry-jam making was a serious business at Lowburn, for strawberry jam was a large item of consumption at the Vicarage, and Rob could hardly remember having tea there without a plentiful supply of it.

The fruit picking had to be done in a business-like and methodical way under Nurse's directions and, I tell you, it was rather back-aching work, and heating too on the sunny strawberry beds on the slope of the hill, though you were free to refresh yourself with the great, cool, scarlet fruit as you went along.

Nurse provided the whole party with pinafores or aprons which Rob, up to this year, had donned without a murmur, nor thought of any absurdity in his appearance. But this year, as he went he made up his mind that, under Sinclair's critical eye, he would rather not make a fool of himself. He also, with a view to that eye, put on his Sunday coat, which, though disguised with dust, was at once recognized by Christy, who came running out to meet him, and who insisted on his taking it off forthwith, and, if he must wear a coat at all, put on an old one of the Vicar's which had reached the green hue which black acquires with much wear.

"I have been watching for you ever so long, Rob," Christy said, linking a small arm in his, "for I want you to be my partner and help me fill my basket. We are all going to begin at the same time and have partners, and whoever gets their basket filled first, will have the prize. It was Mr. Sinclair suggested the idea of partners, and he's going to give

the prize. It will be such fun. Tibby wanted me to be partner with him, but he eats such a lot that I know we shouldn't have a chance — and I do want the prize awfully. Look here, Rob, I can show it you if you can come into the next room. It's a lot of little boxes one inside the other, till you get to the very wee-est little box that you can hardly see."

Poor Rob, in the Vicar's old coat, was ruefully putting two and two together about this partner business — an odious innovation it seemed to him on the old simplicity of each one filling his basket as quickly as he could, with liberty to tip his store into one of the little ones' baskets when he or she was not looking, so as to equalize the amount brought in to Nurse, and to prevent loss of self-respect or over-much crowing.

Or perhaps it would be better to say that Rob was putting one and one together — Kit and Mr. Sinclair — as it was easy enough to understand for what purpose the idea of partners was suggested. He had a great mind to put on Joe's saddle again and go back to Seadown, but Christy's little clinging hands on his arm restrained the first impulse.

"You'll pick very fast, Rob, won't you?" she was saying, "for I want the prize dreadfully, and I don't believe Kit cares a bit about it. And if Nellie is disappointed, I could give her some of the boxes. I wouldn't mind her having nearly quite all of them, except the little tiny one — but I should like that."

"All right. Come along, Christy! We'll get the prize, and if we don't you shall have as many

little boxes as you like. Hullo, Jack! and whose partner are you going to be? You'd better join on to me and Christy, and we'll be a company — Christy & Co."

But Jack shook his head resolutely. "No; Kit and me is partners. She don't like any partners but me. Mr. Sinclair wanted us to let him come in, but we wouldn't. Kit says we're very scoosive. What does 'scoosive' mean, Rob?"

It meant, judging by Rob's radiant face, something very admirable, which had taken away all desire to shuffle back to Seadown, and made him catch Jack up, and set him astride on his neck and go prancing off into the garden with Christy clinging to his arm; and he put on one of Nurse's large aprons without demur.

Why, he would have put on her cap as well, with the delightful assurance that Kit had refused to be Stuart Sinclair's partner in strawberry gathering!

And there was Kit, herself, coming to meet him; just the same Kit, not a bit altered into "the little miss over there," which Dr. Chambers had conjured up before Rob's mind — a little affected minx, with arts and affectations, trying to catch the fancy of Stuart Sinclair.

"Why, Rob," she said reproachfully; "I thought you must be ill as you didn't come over, and you knew the strawberries were ripe. Nurse said if we waited any longer the rain would come, and we mightn't get the chance of picking the fruit in the dry. And oh, Rob, you never told us what a nice,

old man your father is, and so good-looking! Not a bit like you."

"Yes, he is a fine-looking old chap," said Rob, quite imperturbable at the slight to his own personal appearance, in the pleasure at the compliment to his father, who, by the way, would not have been best pleased at the way he was described, even though it was meant as high praise.

"He was so pleasant and kind on Sunday when he came, and he looked at that scratch on Bogey's leg, and prescribed for him. Fancy Bogey being prescribed for by a great, clever doctor! We tell him he ought to be a very proud little dog."

"And how do you like Sinclair?"

"Oh, we all like him very much," said Kit—"don't we, Nellie? He and Nellie are going to be partners over the strawberry picking; and Jack and I, and Christy said she must have you. So poor Tibby is left out in the cold, and he's actually trying to persuade father to come and help him."

Rob was a simple-minded creature, so he was not rendered suspicious by the way in which the conversation, now, and on several subsequent occasions, turned off from Stuart Sinclair.

"I thought she would have been quite full of him," he told himself with much satisfaction, "and that I should have heard of nothing else. I believe she thinks more of the pater than she does of him. And she always tells off Nellie to go with Sinclair, or do anything for him. If Nellie was not a great, long-legged child still, one might have said it was she that

Sinclair was smitten with. And he hardly takes any notice of Kit, though he can't help seeing she is the flower of the flock, and not one of them is fit to hold a candle to her; but I dare say he's a bit nettled at her being so cool to him. Why, she hardly looked at him when he came up from the shore — though, by Jove! what a good-looking fellow he is! — just out of the sea, with his hair all wet and crisp and curling, and such a colour! Not looking all blue and horrid, like I do, with swelled purple lips and teeth chattering like castanets. If she'd treated me like that — just going off to the strawberry beds as if she was vexed at being kept waiting — I know I should have been jolly miserable till I'd set it right with her. But he didn't seem to mind a bit, but kept fooling about with Tibby, as if Kit wasn't there."

And so, this keen observer of human nature felt greatly comforted, not to say elated, and began almost to pity Stuart Sinclair, and wish that Kit would not show her preference for him, Rob, so distinctly, keeping him near her, and making him fetch and carry and do all manner of little services for her, which she declined when Stuart offered them. If it had not been Kit, Rob would have thought her a little capricious and wayward, and he looked at her once or twice with an inquiring puzzled look, which made Kit colour up in an odd unusual way very unlike her usual sunny calm.

But she was not capricious or wayward to him; but so kind, and gentle, and considerate that Rob found

it in his heart to be quite friendly and genial to Sinclair, who responded more heartily than Rob would have done in his place if Stuart had been favoured by Kit, and Rob been snubbed.

All the rest of the family, including the Vicar, were devoted to Sinclair; and even Rob began to feel the attraction of his pleasant, genial manner, and was quite sorry when Kit called him away from the group under the mulberry tree after dinner, gathered round Sinclair, who was giving a thrilling description of an adventure with a bear in the Rockies—the Vicar being as much interested as Tibby.

It was only some question about the croquet-hoops that Kit wanted to ask him about, which would have done quite as well later on; and, after all, she did not pay much attention to his advice on the subject, being all the time half listening to the scraps of Sinclair's story, which reached them from time to time across the garden, and the children's delighted comments on the narrative, while Rob, who could not do two things at once, pounded away solidly on the croquet-hoop question.

I am not sure that those two standing together by the garden-fence in such a pleasant, confidential attitude, did not affect the course of the story about the bear; for the narrator could not tell that the subject under discussion was only a croquet-hoop, and that even that had very divided attention from one of the two—certain it is, that when Kit laid her hand on Rob's arm, to emphasize some remark, the bear suddenly, and somewhat tamely, went off into

the forests, without even a mouthful out of the leg that was in such imminent peril the moment before.

"I thought you said that was how your friend lost his leg?" persisted inconvenient Tibby.

"Did I? Oh no, that's another story. But *I* shall lose my leg in another minute, if Master Jack sits on it so solid. I've got the cramp in it jolly bad."

CHAPTER IX.

CHANGE.

"A touch which seems to unlock
Treasure unknown as yet ;
And the bitter, sweet, first shock
One never can forget."

LORD HOUGHTON.

ROB travelled home from Lowburn that night in an unusually contemplative state of mind—contemplation not being at all in his line in a general way.

Horses soon understand the humour of their riders, and, before Joe had scrambled up the steep hill out of Lowburn, he knew that he might take advantage of Rob to any extent, even to stopping for a minute to sample a particularly green and juicy kind of grass, or, like the horse described by Mark Twain, to lean up against the wall and think.

Rob's mind was not disquieted on the subject of Stuart Sinclair and Kit. About that he felt quite at ease, as it was so plain that Kit did not even like him as well as the others did, and certainly not as well as she did him, Rob.

But the very certainty of Kit's liking make him think more of what manner of man it was that Kit liked ; and, indeed, I think it was almost the first

time Rob had thought of himself as a man at all, being but little inclined to think of himself in any way, and now only in a roundabout way, as the fellow that Kit liked.

And with that came a sudden feeling of regret that he was such a duffer, and had never done anything at school; and in this altogether new effort at introspection, he searched about in his very simply-constructed mind—which had no corners or crannies, like many minds—to see if it was his fault, and if he had done his best.

“I’m afraid I was a beastly idle chap,” he said ruefully; “but I don’t think I could have done better if I’d tried. Now, if I could have been a clever chap like Sinclair, and told ripping stories, how pleased the pater would have been. But she wouldn’t have liked me any the better, so it don’t matter.”

But Sinclair’s coming had introduced an element of change into the peaceful life at Lowburn, and had disturbed that calm, indefinite feeling of things going on just as they had done for years past. Not only things might change, but Rob realized that things had changed. He himself was a man—he would be twenty next birthday. Kit was grown up, which he had not realized till he impressed it on Stuart Sinclair, to reprove the impertinence of calling her by her Christian name. Even Nellie was nearly grown up, and would be turning up her hair and lengthening her petticoats before long. And so with them all—even little Jack was no

longer a baby, but did regular lessons with Kit, and was too much of a man to cry when he fell on the gravel and scored his fat knees severely.

What further changes might the future bring? And just then Tibby's confidence in the hay-field came back to Rob's mind. "You see, Rob, Kit's getting on now; and she's not bad-looking, and many girls of her age have young men."

Though Stuart Sinclair might not be the young man of Tibby's prognostications. Why not another? Why not——

And here Joe had quite a long rest, while Rob stared away hard at the dark shoulder of the down, outlined against the pale indigo sky, with a big soft star just showing over the ridge. It was a pity, Joe thought, they had not made the halt at a place where there was grass to be nibbled; but still, rest even on a dusty road is not a thing to be despised.

It was quite intolerable to think of Kit marrying any one else; but the other alternative caught his breath, and made him gasp and choke as if a big wave had swept over him. Science tells us that there is no such thing as colour, except in the light; but no science could convince me that Rob was not crimson to the tips of his ears at that first thought of marrying Kit.

But if that was to be anything more than an idea, as distant as that calm-looking star over the edge of the down there, there must be no more of this pottering, do-nothing life, kicking his heels about Seadown, killing time, getting through the day anyhow, from

mealtime to mealtime, from bedtime to bedtime. He must turn-to somehow — anyhow — at something. It did not much matter what. He was not a clever chap, but it was hard lines if he could not find something he could do to earn his living, and make a home for Kit.

And then again came a long stop for Joe, and more staring away over the darkness to the big star, which somehow, often afterwards came back to his mind connected with Kit and his love for her, for the first time that night formed into a conscious, sensible feeling, though in its unconscious, unrealized form, it had been in his heart ever since he had shamefacedly sidled up to the bright-faced little girl on the beach, and presented her with a crab.

And, after that second long pause, Joe became conscious of some subtle change in his rider — some briskness and energy in his treatment, which Joe hardly thought was an improvement on the pleasant, old, slip-slop manner of getting along with a loose rein, and freedom to choose whichever part of the road looked the easiest for old feet, and the pace that was most agreeable to the same.

Dr. Chambers, too, was irritably conscious of a change in Rob as he came in, and, as he had had some annoying business letters by the evening post, he was not in a humour to be sympathetic, or even patient, with Rob's somewhat blundering efforts to consult him on his future course in life ; and, while Rob was stammering and repeating himself and trying to remember some of the uncommonly sensible things he

had said to himself as he rode home, Dr. Chambers gathered up his papers and writing-materials, and went off to his consulting-room, merely saying —

“I really can’t pretend to understand what you mean, so I think I’ll bid you good night.”

But as poor Rob, greatly crest-fallen, made his way up to bed, he saw that same bright star shining steadily over the sea. “Though, of course,” Rob told himself, “it can’t be the same, for that was just over the down halfway to Lowburn.”

But it comforted him all the same.

It was not only on Rob that that day of strawberry picking had impressed the sense of change, though perhaps with Kit the feeling had begun before. It is when a girl first reads the look of love in a man’s eyes that the happy sense of stability in childhood and early youth passes away; that feeling of one day following another with little variation, and spring gliding on into summer and being much the same, except that the roses are out on the old home walls instead of the violets under the well-known hedge; the impression that one year is much like another, and that the swallows come back and build in the porch, and the primroses blossom year after year in the same little coppice, and that if you do not pick them one year you will the next.

And then, all of a sudden something startles you with the consciousness of change. Sometimes, it is death’s cold shadow thrown across the sunny garden, and you realize that the swallows may come back and the primroses bloom, and Nature repeat herself

with but small variations ; but other eyes will be there to see and other hands to gather the flowers.

And sometimes, as I have said, it is love that strikes across a girl's simplicity like a lightning flash at sea, revealing that beyond the snug little vessel of home lies a great wide sea and distant shore, full, no doubt, of infinite possibilities of happiness, but mixed with doubt and uncertainty and mystery. But after that flash she can never feel that everything is contained in that small cockle-shell boat that was large enough to satisfy her childish ideas.

It was the look in Stuart Sinclair's eyes that was the first revelation to Kit of possibilities beyond Lowburn and home ; and if that look was not love, it was something so like, and meant to be so like it, that it might well have been mistaken by a girl of seventeen.

Just then, when Rob on Joe's back had come to that sudden stop halfway to Seadown, and remained as if transfixed — staring like a stuck pig, as his father would have thought, only I think he would have put it into more elegant words — at the big, bright star, Kit up at her bedroom window was looking out, by a curious coincidence, at that very star, which would have upset Rob's extremely rudimentary knowledge of astronomy, by appearing over the barn roof on the opposite slope of the hill.

She had been putting Jack to bed. In spite of the change in him, that Rob had been struck with that very day, Jack was still baby enough to like to have some one to tuck him up and stop a minute or two after the light was out — not that men of four are

afraid of the dark, but there is generally something important to say, just at the moment when the candle goes out, something that will not keep till morning.

"Miss Kit," Nurse would say, "you're just spoiling that child."

But to-night Kit stopped long after those important somethings had grown drowsy and indistinct, and given way to peaceful regular breathing; and, as I have said, she stood in the window and watched that star over the barn.

Down below from under the mulberry tree came the voices of her father and Stuart Sinclair, and the smell of his cigarettes which he had been teaching Nellie and Christy to roll for him, mingled with the soft dewy fragrance of the June night, roses, and new-mown hay.

Kit's cheeks were hot and flushed, and even Jack had noticed it as he drew her face down with his fat hands on either side of it, to kiss him on his pillow.

The flush had come into them as she stood outside the gate in the dusk, watching Rob ride away, with that affectionate, amused recognition of his awkward horsemanship, and the imminent peril he was in of falling off when he turned to call a last word to her.

Stuart Sinclair had come up, and stood leaning his arms on the top of the gate, so that she could not open it to go back into the garden without his making way for her.

"You have treated me very badly to-day, Miss Kit," he said.

And she wondered if she could get in another way, through the stable, on pretence of saying good night to Dimple.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, trying to speak lightly, for of course he was only joking.

"Don't you?" he said. "Shall I tell you? You have only spoken to me twice, and you have only looked at me about three times. Oh, it's no use shaking your head. It's quite true. You have had no eyes or ears for any one but that —— I beg your pardon! for he's evidently a great friend of yours. But it's rather hard lines on a fellow to be set aside as completely as I have been to-day."

"I'm very sorry," she stammered; "I didn't mean to be rude. But, you see, I've known Rob all my life, and I didn't think you cared."

I think this must have been the first time that Kit had said anything not absolutely true, and I think it was then that the colour rushed hotly up into her cheeks that was still burning there when Jack bade her good night; for she knew that Sinclair had noticed her absorption in Rob, and if, indeed, she had only looked at him three times that day, each time had detected an expression of reproach and injury.

"Cared?" he said, and his voice sank low to a tone of tenderness that vibrated through all the girl's pulses as something strange and sweet but terrifying. "Cared? I am fool enough to care very much, Kit."

She had put up her hand to open the gate and

make her escape, but he laid his hand gently over hers and kept her a prisoner. If it had been Rob, she would just have caught her hand away, and have bidden him to stand out of the way, and not be tiresome ; but now she stood hot and shy and tremulous, afraid to look up at the dark face that was looking down at her with something in the eyes that she felt without seeing, and which, rather than meet, she would have had the earth open and swallow her up.

There was a minute's silence, most eloquent — silence which she would have given worlds to break, by some light, trivial remark, that would counteract the meaning of the pause. She could hear her own heart beating and his breath coming quickly. A great, soft, white owl flew out of the ivy-covered roof of the barn, and sailed silently overhead, and a cricket chirruped its monotonous little note hard by.

“Kit,” he said again, dwelling tenderly, as if it were very sweet to his lips, on the Christian name that Rob had so indignantly reproved him for using. “Kit !”

But just then the name was taken roughly out of his mouth, and echoed in several different keys, and at the top of strong young lungs.

“Kit !” shouted Tibby's penetrating voice. “Kit ! Coo-ey ! Hullo there ! Where are you ?”

“Kit !” in Nellie's shriller accents. “Kit ! Kittee !”

“Kit !” in Christy's sweet, little pipe, like a black-bird in the evening.

“Kit!” from Jack, rather thick with bread-and-butter.

Even “Miss Kit, dear! where are you?” from Nurse’s voice at the back door.

And “Kit!” from the study window from Mr. Brownlow, who could not find his newspaper.

Stuart Sinclair let Kit’s hand escape with a muttered exclamation of annoyance, and opened the gate for her to pass; and she fled into the house like a frightened bird, and was glad to hurry Jack’s departure to bed to recover her composure upstairs.

CHAPTER X.

TAKING THOUGHT FOR THE MORROW.

"Thus times do shift, each thing his turne do's hold;
New things succeed as former things grow old."

HERRICK.

AS Mr. Brownlow and Stuart Sinclair sat under the mulberry tree that evening, Sinclair was less talkative than usual; and it was the Vicar's voice which came most frequently to the ears of the girl at the window above.

On the Vicar, too, in some mysterious way, had come that sense of change that Rob and Kit had experienced, and his mind, almost in spite of itself, kept taking thought for the morrow; and having a sympathetic listener — and one not too closely concerned, as was Kit, in what that morrow might bring forth — to listen composedly when the Vicar talked of that change which must come to us all, sooner or later, and which he felt could not be long delayed for him, he opened out to Stuart Sinclair more than he had done to any one else for many a day.

First of all, it was about his parish that he talked, and of his successor — another Vicar of Lowburn — who might perhaps do more there than he had been

able to do, but who might not understand the temper of some of those he would have to deal with, or consider their little peculiarities.

"There's a lot of good in them, Sinclair," the Vicar said, with an indulgent smile, "but they have a queer way of showing it sometimes, and strangers don't know always what to make of them. They're very like children, and sometimes very naughty ones. But it is no use taking them too seriously. I remember, eight years ago, when there was a talk of my going away to another living, how hard it seemed to part with my odd, tiresome, obstinate flock—do you know, Sinclair, it seems sometimes more like being a swineherd than a shepherd!—with all their inarticulate love for me and the little ones, and their ignorance and weakness. After all, it's the naughty children one is often the fondest of; and I could not bear to think of any one standing in my shoes, and having the guidance—perhaps driving instead of guiding, and ordering instead of humouring. Well, we didn't go. It was a better living, and might have been a good thing for the children, and perhaps for the wife's health. But there, I wasn't the right man, and some one else was, and I was quite content when I saw how pleased the poor folk here were that I was going to stay. It's not a case of a living now, Sinclair; it's a case of dying, or rather, please God, it's a case of a new living across the dark river."

Sinclair gave a little sympathetic murmur, and presently the Vicar went on—

"It's not so much about leaving the parish, that I

think now, when I get my preferment. I've felt my age a good bit lately. I can't take up new notions, and work my parish on new lines, as perhaps I should. I'm getting a bit sleepy and old-fashioned, and when I go to the ruri-decanal meetings, and run up against some of those earnest, clever, young men, I feel what an old fossil I am. If I could see my way plain about the children, as I can't take them with me to this new living —— Now, if I had gone to Pilton eight years ago. The income was nearly double what it is here, and it was not such an out-of-the-way place, and there were resident gentry who helped with the charities, and would have been friends with the children. But here, you see, there's no one. Of course there are a few of the clergy about, that we are supposed to visit with; but there are sometimes months when we don't see any one but just the Lowburn folk; and if it were not for the children and for the future, I should be quite content. But suppose, now, anything should happen to me, the children have not a friend in the world except Rob Chambers, and he —— ”

Sinclair gave a little derisive laugh, and flicked off the end of his cigarette.

“Oh, he's a thorough good fellow, and I'm always glad to think they should have him. But he's not much more than a boy himself. That's the worst, Sinclair, of marrying late in life. You see, the children are so young. There's Jack hardly more than a baby, and it will be years before Tibby will be earning his own living, much less his sisters. Take

my advice and marry young, with a chance of seeing your children's children."

"Have you no relations?"

"Well, you know, there's my brother — poor fellow. You have not told us much about him, but I hope no news is good news, and that he is doing better than in his former days. Perhaps you know that he has been very unfortunate, and, at times, has been a source of some little anxiety?"

"Yes," Sinclair said. "I gathered from what he has told me at different times that life has not gone very smoothly with him. But ——"

"And I have no other relations," Mr. Brownlow went on, following his own line of thought, and unintentionally checking the information about his brother that might have been, and that Sinclair afterwards thought, was on his very lips.

"Philip and I were the only two in our family; and my wife was an orphan, poor girl, and her grandmother, with whom she lived, died very shortly after our marriage, and I never took any trouble to follow up any other relations of hers. I regret it now; but really, up to quite recently, I never realized how curiously isolated we are. It does not matter very much, perhaps, so long as I am spared, but it has been borne in on my mind lately, when I have been thinking of leaving Kit and the others ——"

His voice was a little tremulous, and he left the sentence unfinished.

Sinclair bent eagerly forward. "I'm sure, sir, you need have no fear for the future of Miss Kit. I know ——"

But again the Vicar interrupted. "Yes, yes, lad; and so do I. Thank you for reminding me. I need have no fear; I know they will be taken care of. 'Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?' "

There was a strange look on Stuart Sinclair's face, could any one have seen it through the soft June twilight, which is all that night can manage in the way of darkness at midsummer; but it is enough to hide transient expressions passing over a face even close by. It was the first time he had ever been thanked for administering spiritual consolation or a rebuke for want of faith, and nothing had been further from his thoughts when he spoke, and the look and the feeling it expressed was a curious mixture of amusement and compunction and regret.

"I should like to talk to you about Mr. Philip Brownlow," he said rather abruptly. "I promised him to tell you all about his affairs."

"Yes, yes," the Vicar said a little bit wearily. Philip's affairs in old days had been synonymous with trouble and debt and painful endeavours to set matters right; and though, for the last few years there had been a respite from this, he shrank a little nervously from taking up the old worry again.

"I shall like to hear all about him another time. But it is prayer-time now, and we must go in."

Stuart gave a little, imperceptible shrug of his shoulders as they rose to go in.

"Well, if he won't listen, it's not my fault," he was saying to himself. "I have made two attempts at it this evening. The fact is, he's got it so firmly

into his head that old Philip is a bad hat, it would be quite a business to convince him to the contrary. Well, perhaps it is quite as well I should make my running with Miss Kit before she realizes that she is an heiress."

Kit was a little bit shy of him that evening, and kept out of his way as much as possible, finding various excuses with the children, or household matters, to interrupt what had been most evenings a pleasant *tête-à-tête*, when the little ones were in bed, and Mr. Brownlow a little dozy over his second day's *Standard*.

But to-night there were no quiet little dozings possible for the Vicar, so persistently did Kit include him in the conversation; and Nurse got as irritable as she ever could be with Kit, at repeated inroads into the kitchen with perfectly unnecessary directions or inquiries about matters which Nurse considered her own concern.

"There, Miss Kit, there ain't no call for you to be so fidgeting. I ain't been here all these years without knowing about the jam."

But the old servant had a dim sort of motherly understanding of the girl's unusual restlessness — of the need of some sympathy from one of her own sex, that a girl has in those bewildering sweet days of first love.

"I remember, in my old courting days" — courting that came to nothing, from Tom taking to drink and bad company — "as I liked to give mother a kiss before I went along the lane to meet him. A

girl do want a mother at times, though Madam wasn't much to call a mother either."

And so, after some cross little snub about fidgeting and worrying, Nurse would call Kit back to settle more tidily a soft plait of the bright hair she loved to dress, or brush a little invisible dust from her sleeve.

"Bless her heart!" — as she let her go. "And he's a nice, pleasant-spoken young gentleman; and it seems for all the world as if he'd been sent right across from America a-purpose for our Miss Kit, as might have gone on here to doomsday without any one finding her out. And, master — there! I don't suppose it would ever cross his mind as young ladies did ought to be married. And Miss Nellie coming on and talking of turning up her hair — though whatever we shall do without Miss Kit, I can't imagine."

CHAPTER XL

RETROSPECT.

“Gold banish’d honour from the mind
And only left the name behind,
Gold sowed the world with every ill,
Gold taught the murderer’s sword to kill.”

GAY.

“ANOTHER pipe, Mr. Sinclair?” Mr. Brownlow said. “You *are* an inveterate smoker! Well, I think I’ll go to bed — if you don’t think me rude — and leave you to close the study window, and put out the lamp before you turn in. I’m not making a stranger of you, you see.”

“I should hope not,” the young man said heartily, as he wrung the Vicar’s hand. “It has been pretty cool of me to come and quarter myself on you here — a fellow you don’t know anything of; but you’ve been so awfully kind and hospitable that I’ve never once felt an intruder.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ve never felt you one. You’re very welcome. Good night to you. Be sure you bolt the window, or we shall catch it from Nurse.”

He certainly was an inveterate smoker, for the stars were growing pale from the gradual brightening of the east, before he got up from his seat under the mulberry tree and went indoors, bolting the window,

according to his host's injunctions ; and the first soft bird-call sounded through the dewy greyness as he got into bed.

Perhaps a glimpse into his mind, as he sat in the Vicarage garden, may throw some light on that thought of his, recorded in the last chapter, about Kit realizing that she was an heiress.

He was going back that night to his youth, which, though he was still a young man, seemed a very long-passed and finished period — a stormy time of ups and downs, self-will, recklessness, chances thrown away, friends trifled with and lost, love sacrificed, time wasted, excitement ending in weariness, pleasure turning to ashes.

He was able to review it all now dispassionately and say, "What a young fool I was !"

The last hopeless breakdown was at San Francisco ; and he remembered a certain night when the game seemed entirely played out, and there was nothing left for it but to put an end to a life that had been a miserable failure. His last allies — they never could have been called friends — had turned out, what he had long suspected, swindlers and blacklegs ; and the whole gang were in the hands of the police. Only Stuart, by some accident, had escaped, and now found himself penniless in the streets of San Francisco — ill in body and mind, hopeless and homeless, only seeking dully in his brain for the best means of getting out of it all into the eternal silence.

He shuddered at the memory of that night, sitting there in the perfect calm of midsummer midnight, not

a sound from the sleeping village behind, not a stir in the Vicarage, where all the windows were dark except the study, from whence a long ray of light struck across the lawn and geranium bed. Above, through the branches of the mulberry tree, he could see Cassiopeia's big W ; and now and then a bat flickered silently past, seeming to add to the stillness by its silent flight.

That night at which he shuddered, the streets were crowded and noisy, and, from a drinking-saloon hard by, came the sound of a coarse comic song, with a chorus which was taken up and shouted, with bursts of noisy laughter, at the end of each verse, and the tune came back to him now with its vulgar, commonplace iteration.

The gas was flaring, and, up above, a pale moon sailed through hurrying clouds, like Fate coldly indifferent to the turbulence of the world. People of all nations jostled him ; a tipsy negro lurched up against him ; tawdrily dressed, painted women leered up into his face, and one of them caught at his arm, the hand of which, in his pocket, was fingering the revolver that was so soon to end it all. Across the black, oily water in the harbour came streaks of undulating light from the ships moored there, and the sound of a steamer getting up steam, and a donkey engine paying out a rusty chain. He could hear and see it all, as he sat in that heavenly, star-lit silence.

It was just then, after that last despairing look round on the hollow hideousness of life, as he pushed his way blindly out of the crowd, to get space to use

his arm for its deadly purpose, he stumbled against Philip Brownlow, who angrily bid him mind where he went ; and then with a sudden, heaven-sent revelation of the purpose in that white, set face and dull, desperate eyes, caught hold of his arm and drew him aside.

Perhaps Philip Brownlow had in his time felt something of the same, and so could interpret the outward manifestations which another might have set down to brutal intoxication ; but, anyhow, his arm once slipped through Sinclair's, he did not let him go again, but took him away to his own poor lodging, and there nursed him day and night for six weeks, during most of which time Sinclair lay unconscious and helpless, only by degrees coming back to life as weak and dependent as a baby.

When he was fit to move, Philip Brownlow took him away to a small ranch, which had come into his possession in a roundabout way, and which he only regarded as a white elephant to be got rid of as soon as possible.

It was pleasant enough in the summer to idle away the time in the old, dilapidated log-house and the neglected orange plantation, making pretence now and then at active work, turning up a bit of weedy ground, clearing away rubbish, devising alterations, reckoning up on paper profits from poultry-rearing or fruit-growing, which sounded highly promising as they ran off the end of a lead pencil. And then some fellows might ride over from the next ranch, where much the same profitless work was going on, and the

whole party would betake themselves to the store in the nearest village, which formed a centre for news and gossip, of a radius larger than many English counties. And sometimes, without even this excuse for idleness, they by mutual consent would, as they said, "chuck" work, and just smoke and lounge away the day very contentedly — sometimes talking, sometimes in silence.

It was exactly the sort of life that Stuart Sinclair needed to restore his health, both of body and mind ; and Philip Brownlow was so unfeignedly glad of his company, that there was no galling sense of obligation, though the young fellow was indebted to the older man for everything, including, to a great extent, his restoration to health, which was largely due to Mr. Brownlow's careful and unwearied nursing.

But as winter came on, they both felt that some move must be made, and just as they were debating what that move should be, an offer was made, and a fairly good offer, too, to take the ranch off Mr. Brownlow's hands.

It seemed quite providential, at first sight, to have this offer just when they wanted to leave, and would enable them to return to the haunts of men with a tidy little sum in their pockets. Mr. Brownlow had his pen in his hand, to close with the offer, before the proposed purchaser thought better of it, and was told what a poor bargain he was making, when another purchaser turned up, in person this time, having ridden a long distance ; and he was palpably so anxious to effect the purchase off-hand, that Mr. Brownlow's

suspensions were aroused, and he would not be in a hurry to part with his property till he could discover the cause for its being so suddenly in demand.

This was not far to seek, for in a few days it transpired that mineral oil had been found in the neighbourhood ; and that there was good reason to suppose that Brownlow's ranch, which had been so unremunerative for fruit-growing or cattle-raising, on the surface, might prove to be a fortune to its possessors from its underground wealth.

And so Philip Brownlow — this broken-down, unlucky, out-at-elbows man, found himself not exactly a millionaire, but very decidedly wealthy. Poverty and debt, and shifty ways of getting along, and shabbiness and humiliation, and the cold shoulder and distrust from respectable age, and familiarity and rough insolence from disreputable youth — all these were things of the past.

In his prosperity his thoughts turned directly to home, and to the brother who had helped him so willingly to the very utmost of his power in the old days, and to little Kit, the sunny-faced child, who had laughed and played with him, and for whose sake, ultimately, he had gone clean away, that he might not rob her, through the kindness of her father, of the little patrimony that might come to her out of that father's slender income.

Stuart Sinclair had been quite right in fancying that Philip Brownlow still imagined Kit to be a little girl ; and, when he dreamed of going back to Lowburn, pictured her still, playing about the garden with

her doll, or being carried on her uncle's shoulder round the meadow.

He was in a perfect fever to be off, and could hardly wait till the necessary business was concluded, before he set off with Stuart Sinclair on the seemingly endless journey eastward.

Of the two, he apparently bore the journey best, for Sinclair's strength had so recently been restored that it could not bear any very great strains on it; and he often wondered at the old man's energy and pluck in bearing the fatigue of it, in his great anxiety to push on and lose no time in getting home.

Perhaps he over-estimated his strength, or perhaps the excitement and intoxication of the sudden change in his fortunes was too much for his brain, for when they reached New York he suddenly broke down, and for a long time lay unconscious, as if he were embarking on the last voyage to another world. In his illness he was watched over and cared for by Stuart Sinclair.

Stuart dwelt much that night at Lowburn on the care and devotion of his nursing of the old man, setting each wakeful night and patient day of watching and tending against those that Mr. Brownlow had bestowed on him when he was ill, trying to persuade himself that the debt of gratitude was more than repaid, and with interest, too, for the old man was a tiresome and exacting patient, restless and capricious. It was true, of course, that in this case there was no want of means to supply every comfort and luxury for the old man's sickroom — skilled medical attendance con-

stantly at hand, and excellent trained nurses to share Stuart's labours, while, when Stuart was ill, even the ordinary necessities of life were difficult to arrive at, and the old man must often have gone hungry and cold himself to supply nourishment and warmth to the young stranger who had no manner of claim upon him.

"I would have done the same for him," Stuart assured himself, as memory called up little details of his old friend's self-denying kindness which he would gladly just then have forgotten.

It was weeks before Mr. Brownlow rallied, and even then, his convalescence was so slow that the doctors gave little hope of his being fit to proceed on his journey for months.

Stuart remembered the day when the old man first proposed to send him on before him to England, to tell Mr. Brownlow's relations of his good fortune. He recalled how he looked as he lay on the sofa, propped up with pillows, with such a waxy, yellowish-white face, so hollow-eyed and emaciated and drawn. He had been trying to write; but his hand was weak and tired already with the few lines he had traced, and he flung down the pen, and pushed the blotting-pad wearily away.

"I shall have to send you, Stuart," he said.

It was only said in joke at first, but by-and-by the idea took serious shape, and he was feverishly anxious to hasten Stuart's departure.

"You can go and look up your own people, of course; but what I want you to do is to go to Lowburn and see my brother, and tell him all about this

stroke of luck, and say that, when I have got up my strength, I shall come to England and settle down somewhere handy. I shall take a nice country place, if I can find one, near Lowburn, and settle down and be a J.P. and churchwarden, and read the lessons in church —— ” He broke off, laughing feebly at the thought of his brother’s surprise and incredulity at the idea of the ne’er-do-weel in such a new character. “I shall take Kit right off his hands, and adopt her, if he will let me; and I expect there are half a dozen others by this time, so he can well spare me one. Why, she must be getting a big girl; but I hope she hasn’t grown out of her funny little ways.”

Now and then it would dawn upon him that time had not been standing still at Lowburn during his absence, and might have worked changes in the baby child of fourteen years ago; but directly afterwards he would revert to the old idea, and talk of Kit’s doll and Kit’s pinafores and baby talk.

Sinclair was not very keen about going at first. There were people and places in England to which he preferred to give a wide berth; and in the large spaces and big distances of America, England seems a little, densely peopled island where you can hardly avoid running up against friend or foe, will ye, nill ye.

He was, also, honestly loth to leave the old man in his weak condition. He had not yet begun weighing one act of kindness against another — a sure sign that gratitude has become an irksome duty and begun very rapidly to evaporate. There was also an under-

lying feeling that, if he were out of the way, some one else might step in and take his place, and get the influence over Philip Brownlow that had belonged hitherto exclusively to him. It was wonderful the number of friends and acquaintances that had turned up since Mr. Brownlow's accession to wealth — some of them, no doubt, had no ulterior motive in reviving a friendship that had lain dormant during his years of impecuniosity, but none of them had the voucher of sincerity which Sinclair possessed, of having been a friend in the time of poverty.

Sinclair met the doctor one day coming out of his patient's room.

"You'd better go," he said; "the old gentleman is wearing himself to fiddle-strings about it, and he won't rest now till you're off. He'll settle solidly down to getting better when you're gone, though I very much doubt if he'll ever be well enough to go himself; but there's no knowing, there's plenty of life in the old fellow yet. And, if you come back in a month or two, I think the chances are that you'll find him *in statu quo*."

So it was settled for Sinclair to start the following week for England, with the understanding that he should return after he had been to Lowburn, and taken such time as he wanted for visiting his own friends, or attending to his own affairs.

"Though, of course," the old man added, "if they are not pressing, you might let them stand over till we go home together; for by the time you get back I shall be pretty well all right again, and up to the journey."

So no exact limit of time was set for his return ; but the eager look on Mr. Brownlow's face showed how anxiously he expected it.

A day or two after this, when Stuart had been out, he found on his return that Mr. Brownlow had had a lawyer with him, and had been making his will.

" I thought I should like to get it all settled before you left, Sinclair, so that you can tell my brother about it. I haven't forgotten you, lad, and there are one or two other legacies ; but the main goes to little Kit, unreservedly—all to her. The little puss will be quite an heiress. Who would have thought of it, when she stood at the gate blowing kisses and calling good-bye to the poor, shabby, disreputable uncle? And look here, Sinclair. I've got that lawyer-chap to get me these ! " — showing a pocket-book full of bank-notes. " I think my brother there will fancy you're romancing when you tell him of my good luck, so I think that will be the most convincing proof. Don't you remember when Joseph sent up to tell his father he was alive, he sent a present to him to make the old man believe the good news? But I can't get about to look up presents for him and his wife and the children. I'm a bit babyish, Sinclair—it's second childhood, perhaps, or perhaps it is that I've not picked up my strength properly since my illness—but I could almost cry with pleasure, at sending this money to Tom ; he has helped me so often—and not a grudging look even. There's two hundred and fifty here altogether, and I send it in notes, because he's

so out of the world it might bother him to send a banker's draft."

It was that afternoon he wrote the letter to his brother, announcing Stuart Sinclair's coming, of which Kit told Rob in the hay-field, and containing that remark which Tibby repeated with such glee about Stuart being a good husband for Kit. This remark was more of a joke even than Tibby took it to be, for Mr. Brownlow was thinking of Kit still as the little baby-child he could catch up and toss in the air and carry off on his shoulder.

CHAPTER XII.

A LETTER.

"O, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive."

SCOTT.

WELL, the reader will say, Stuart Sinclair had a pleasant errand, travelling, as he had never travelled before, in comfort, with money in his pocket, and no need to look at every sixpence before he parted with it; and being the bearer of such good and unexpected news, as would insure him a welcome at the end of his journey. And then, to find so sweet and idyllic a country home, with such simple-minded, unsophisticated people, who would not be suspicious or inquisitive about his past life; and in that sweet shelter a girl like Kit, so fair and gentle, and bright and graceful, and unspoilt—who, indeed, as the doctor had told Rob, had taken Stuart's fancy at the very first sight, and who he knew, and he alone, was not a penniless lass whose face was her only fortune, but one whose name stood in her uncle's will against a good many thousands.

Then why should Sinclair have sat that night under the mulberry tree till the small hours, gnawing his finger-nails in bitter reflection and distracted thought?

I think the reason might have been found at the bottom of his portmanteau, in that pocket-book which Philip Brownlow had committed to him with such satisfaction, excusing the moisture in his eyes, and the tremulous smile on his lips, with an unsteady voice, by pleading the intense pleasure this first act of restitution gave him — for that pocket-book was empty.

“If only that old fool of a man had not sent the money in that form!” Sinclair repeated over and over again, eager to cast the blame on any one rather than himself. “A bill on a banker would have gone easily and safely by post.”

If only there had not been that delay in New York! If only he had not come across those fellows there, whom he had known in days gone by, and who were so mighty civil now that he had a good coat on his back and some money in his pocket! If only one of them had not happened to be crossing in the same steamer! If only he had stuck to his original intention, and kept clear of the cards! If only the old irresistible madness, which had seemed altogether to have died out, had not seized him afresh! He had been able, up to one night at New York, to look back quite calmly and wonder at his old folly, and what possessed him. Ah, that was it! it was possession — and the gambling spirit had only gone out of him for a time and left him, empty, swept and garnished. But in that club-room, with those pleasant fellows urging him to just one friendly game, the spirit said, “I will return unto my house whence I came out.”

It was the same on the voyage. Philip Brownlow had supplied him liberally with funds, but after a run of ill-luck he found himself short, and there seemed no harm in borrowing a note or two from that pocket-book.

He could make it good directly he reached London, where more money was awaiting him. But by the time he arrived there, the borrowing had gone so deep into the notes, that the remittance awaiting him at the bankers was not sufficient to repay it, without running him inconveniently short; and that terrible temptation of the gambler to venture a little more to win back what he had lost, came over him, with the usual result that the rest of the money melted away; and one morning he was obliged to face the fact that he had barely enough money left to take him down to Lowburn, and keep him for a few days.

But what about going to Lowburn at all now? What if the old man had written to tell his brother of the present on its way to him? Sinclair knew of that letter Mr. Brownlow had written on the eve of his departure, and also that it contained no mention of the present which was meant to be a surprise, or of his chance of fortune, of which Sinclair was to inform him. But what if the old man had thought better of it, and written by the next mail to prepare them? He had been very changeable and capricious since his illness, and there was no accounting for what he might do, or even, if some fresh influence brought to bear might not change

his entire confidence in Sinclair to suspicion and distrust.

That implicit, childlike confidence in him made Sinclair wince and redden, even while he sought all manner of excuses for his conduct, and maintained that it served the old man right, for being so childish and sentimental over that present to his brother.

But what excuse could he give to the parson at Lowburn for that money not being forthcoming, fancying him something like his brother in his days of poverty, only with a pack of hungry children at his back to make him eager and grasping?

And if he did not go to Lowburn at all, what could he say to Mr. Brownlow when he went back?

And if he did not go back at all, but just slipped out of sight. What could he do? where could he go? how could he live? and how about that legacy which Mr. Brownlow had told him was in his will?

And amid all his distracting thoughts and selfish considerations of all it would cost him if he never went back, there was mixed an honest regret at never seeing his old friend any more. So curiously mingled are feelings in all of us.

He was still hesitating what he could do, when a letter reached him from the doctor, who had so strongly advised him to go, and who had promised to look after the old man in his absence. He said that Mr. Brownlow had had a relapse after Sinclair left — a reaction after the excitement and interest which had buoyed him up during the few last days before Sinclair's departure.

“ He is looking anxiously for news from you. It is the only thing that rouses him. At other times, he seems sunk in a sort of stupor which I don’t half like. I think the sooner you come back the better, if you want to see him alive.”

After that Stuart decided to go down to Lowburn at once ; and having the introduction to Dr. Chambers went to Seadown first, and from there, as we have seen, went on to Lowburn, where he found no grasping parson hungrily looking out for his dues and keen after his brother’s money, but a life in which the cares and riches and pleasures of this world seemed to have but little part, and a kindly, generous hospitality extended to a stranger, who had no claim on him except as being a friend of the brother whom he still concluded to be poor and impecunious. It was a very new experience to Stuart Sinclair, but he found it very pleasant, and, in the simplicity and purity and unconventionality of the life, he felt so easily at home that he sometimes wondered if he could be the same as the wild, reckless, dissipated Stuart Sinclair of some years back, or even the fevered excited man of a few days ago, with bloodshot eyes and trembling hands, and nerves strained and quivering, watching the turn of a card or the cast of a die—the man possessed with the devil of gambling.

“ After all,” he told himself, “ it is circumstances that are to blame for what a man is. If only —— ” But there were so many “ if onlys ” in Sinclair’s life, it would be wearisome to record them all.

Even now, this pleasant Arcadian life was taking

place over a volcano. Every time the decrepit old postman, with his letter-bag strapped across his shoulders, shambled in at the Vicarage gate and began fumbling with the straps, and turning over the letters with his crooked, rheumatic fingers, Stuart felt that he had reached the end of his tether.

He had witnessed himself the wonderful variations in Philip Brownlow's condition: how one hour he seemed almost unconscious of outside matters and sunk in a dull comatose state, and the next would be all alive and keenly anxious about his affairs, and quite capable, in the fictitious strength produced by excitement, to write himself, or cause some one else to write from his dictation, a letter to his brother which would make matters look very ugly for Stuart.

On the other hand, if the doctor was right, and if this torpor into which Philip Brownlow had fallen was the precursor of death, any mail might bring the intelligence of the end, and then, nothing further need ever be said about that two hundred and fifty pounds, and the news of Kit's accession to wealth would come from the lawyer; and if they wondered at Sinclair not having told them more of the old man's affairs, he could easily say he was not commissioned to do so, and knew nothing of Mr. Brownlow's disposition of his property.

I am afraid, by this time, all that first instinctive feeling of regret at not seeing his old friend again had died away; and he only felt what an ineffable relief it would be, if death's seal of silence lay on those lips that had quivered with emotion as the old

man placed the pocket-book in Sinclair's hands, and if those eyes were closed, which had been moist then with gratified tears, but which now came again and again into Sinclair's dreams with reproach and accusation in them.

Every day that passed without a letter seemed a respite, and he blessed the out-of-the-way situation of Lowburn, which only inflicted one agonizing quarter of an hour in the morning, — when old Hobson was taking his leisurely way up the village street, stopping here and there for a gossip — instead of keeping the nerves constantly on the stretch with a rap-tap at the door every hour or so.

Even if it was the news of Philip Brownlow's death that the worn leather postbag might contain, while Hobson argued the price of ducks within earshot of the Vicarage, it was a relief when the bag was opened day after day and the expected letter did not appear; for in the mean time, he was making his way with Kit, and it would make it all much pleasanter and simpler to have matters pretty well settled between them before the news of her fortune burst upon them.

Not that it would make any difference with Kit. She was not the sort of girl to throw a man over because the money was all on her side. And he tried to persuade himself that his feelings for her, also, were entirely independent, and that he would have fallen in love with her just the same if there had been no rich uncle in the background, and oil wells and piles of dollars.

But he must be patient and not be in a hurry with her. He told himself that evening under the mulberry tree that he had been a little precipitate, and frightened her. It was seeing that Rob Chambers about with her, and on such intimate terms with all of them, and Kit making so much of him — though he suspected Kit of a little innocent coquetry in this, and perhaps, he was right. She was such a shy little bird, that a sudden movement, even of tenderness, might scare her away from the hand that she was inclined to settle on; and once scared, she might never come back to the same innocent fearlessness.

And certainly Rob Chambers was no one to be afraid of as a rival. What a clumsy ass of a fellow he was! Even little Jack made fun of him in that big apron, crouching about in all sorts of ungainly attitudes.

What a lucky chance that no one else had found out this pretty little maiden, who, even as the undowered daughter of a poor country parson, might well have attracted admirers by her *beaux yeux*, and introduced untold complications into the small comedy.

But he must be patient, and to make up for his impetuosity of the evening before, Stuart was more than usually courteously polite next morning, even with a little touch of ceremoniousness. He allowed Tibby and Christy to monopolize him at breakfast, so that Kit had time to get back into her old comfortable self-possession, and grow used to meeting his eye, and speaking to and answering him without the colour rushing up into her cheeks, and her heart jumping

with the remembrance of that interview at the gate.

It was partly on this account, too, and partly to waylay the postman, that he did not join the party taking the scraps to the poultry yard.

So he was by himself on the front lawn when Hobson came in sight; and I do not think that old man could have imagined the purgatory he was inflicting on "the young genelman at parson's," by his prolonged and exhaustive advice on the subject of corn-plasters to Mrs. Tippetts, before he came on to the Vicarage, where Sinclair was leaning on the gate, not at all, apparently, in a fever of expectation, but open to a chat with the old man, and willing, good-naturedly, to take the letters in if there were any.

"Yes, I've a couple of letters for the parson, and one on 'em another of them furrin letters with a queer outlandish stamp on it, same as come t'other day afore you come."

Would he never unbuckle that strap? Sinclair's fingers were itching to snatch it from him and get at the letters.

"As I was a-saying to Mrs. Tippetts," maundered on the old man, "'tis a wonder how them letters come from one end of the world to t'other, and it ain't once in a blue moon as one goes wrong. Dash un all, how this old strap do hitch! I can't think what ails un at times. I say he's like his master — old and rusty. He! he! he! old and rusty that's what I says."

But at last the bag was open and the few letters

taken out, and the two — one of which Sinclair's eye distinguished almost before it was out of the bag — sorted out from among them.

"Ay, ay! this here's the furrin one, sure 'nuff. It ain't often as we gets the likes of he this ways. Now where can I a-put my glasses? Blowed if I ain't left 'em at home! No! here a-be. For *you*, be it now? Well a-never! And I made sure 'twere for the parson. Let's have another look, will ye, now I've got on my specs?" Having fitted on his horn-rimmed glasses with his usual deliberation. "Hullo! blessed if he ain't gone! He do seem in a mighty hurry!"

For Sinclair was striding away towards the house with the letter crushed into his pocket.

"Looks like it's a letter from his sweetheart!" chuckled the old man; "though folks was a-saying as he was sweetheartin' our Miss Kit. But I could a-taken my davy as the furrin letter was for the parson hisself, though my old eyes is getting that dim as there ain't no trusting on 'em. But it ain't often as I'm mistook over a letter neither!"

CHAPTER XIII.

NEWS.

" Nothing can need a lie;
A fault which needs it most grows two thereby."

GEORGE HERBERT.

DOWN at Lowburn Bay, with the broad rippling July sea spread out before him, with far in the distance a puff of smoke on the horizon where an outward-bound steamer passed on its way, and no sound but the gentle break of the mimic waves on the beach and the musical tinkle of the pebbles that the water drew back with it.

Sinclair had passed one of the letters in at the study window to the Vicar, and announced his intention of having a bathe, and had come away quickly, ignoring shouts from Tibby from the hayloft, where he was hunting for a hen who had "stolen her nest," as the Lowburn folk call laying astray; and Kit, standing by the stable door with one of the white pigeons perched on her shoulder, followed his retreating figure with rather a wistful look.

She thought he was a little bit offended or vexed about something: perhaps about her hasty flight last night; but then father was calling, and he knew she always flew directly she heard father's voice. It was

so unlike him to keep apart, and then hurry off by himself.

"I'll run after him," said Tibby, emerging, rather touzled, from the straw. "I don't believe he's got his towels; and he promised to teach me to swim on my back."

But Kit discouraged the idea of following him, and reminded Tibby that it was time for lessons — a punctuality that was rather vexatious after the easy rule prevailing during Sinclair's visit, when both father and Kit had let lessons slide, in a very pleasing manner, if a walk or a game of croquet or a picnic on the beach were proposed. So Tibby did not betake himself to the study with grammar and slate with any great alacrity, and in the next room general flatness prevailed over blotted copy-books and dogs-eared French phrases. And Kit felt it, perhaps, as much as either of them, and even waxed a little impatient over Jack's exceedingly wandering attention, and eyes roving in all directions rather than to the serious contemplation of the word OX in very fat black letters, to which her scissors had been pointing for full two minutes.

But Sinclair was not swimming in the jolly cool water, as Tibby enviously thought, making his slate pencil squeak in the most appalling manner, unendurable to any ears less hardened than Mr. Brownlow's. He was sitting, as I have said, on the shingle at Lowburn Bay, with that letter in his hand.

For the first time he was doing what he knew to be a thoroughly dishonourable action, in cold blood. Yes, the first time — I say it advisedly, though the

reader and I know of that empty pocket-book. There are so many fine shades of honour. There is hardly any one so degraded that he would not be ashamed of doing something which, to an unprejudiced observer, would appear no worse than much that went before. Honour among thieves is quite a real commodity; and Stuart Sinclair hesitated and shrank from opening a letter addressed to another man. Not that for a moment would he have allowed that his honour was the honour of a thief. That unfortunate episode of the banknotes had merely been borrowing at first, and then ill-luck had made repaying impossible. It was only a debt even now, and at the first opportunity he would repay every farthing of it.

But for this very purpose it became necessary for him to do what he felt was dishonourable and ungentlemanly — by opening the letter, for this might be the match to make the mine explode; and the mine once exploded, all hope of restitution or repayment of the so-called debt would be at an end.

Perhaps the atmosphere of simple truth and probity, in which he had been living the last few days, had made him more sensitive in such matters; for surely, in the old days before the episode at San Francisco, he must now and then have done as dirty work as this, or seen others do it, without turning a hair.

Well, it had to be done, so it was no use delaying any longer, and at any moment one or other of the children might appear on the scene and render fur-

ther privacy impossible. So he opened the envelope and spread out the sheet before his unwilling eyes.

"Dear sir," it ran — and it was in a handwriting that Sinclair did not know — "I am writing at the request of your brother, Mr. Philip Brownlow." (He was not dead, then!) "He has been, as no doubt you have heard, very ill, but has rallied within the last fortnight, and is making satisfactory progress. He is, however, rendered anxious at not having heard from a friend of his, Mr. Stuart Sinclair, whom he commissioned to go to you and tell of his present circumstances, which are greatly improved from the discovery of oil wells on a small property belonging to him in California, which enabled him to sell it to great advantage. He also wishes me to inquire whether you received a present which he sent by the hand of Mr. Sinclair, as he is afraid that something may have delayed Mr. Sinclair on his journey, and that the present may not have reached you. He told me that he had instructed Mr. Sinclair to tell you that, in the event of his death, most of his property will come to your daughter, whom he remembers as a little girl. He will be glad if you would write directly on receipt of this, to say if you have heard anything of his friend. I am glad to be able to tell you that the doctor speaks hopefully of Mr. Brownlow's restoration to health, but he is anxious that he should not attempt the voyage at present, and I am trying to persuade my old friend to return with me, for, at any rate, a couple months, to Macklin, but I do not know if he will consent to this, You will be

pleased to hear that he has received every care and attention during his illness, that he has a most excellent nurse and medical attendant; and it has been a fortunate thing that business called me just now to New York so that I have been able to be with my old friend."

The letter was signed "Frank Guest," a name Sinclair did not remember ever to have heard mentioned by Mr. Brownlow, and he did not know where Macklin might be, but concluded it was somewhere not far from New York, since this letter spoke of removing a man there who was not up to the voyage across the Atlantic. He spoke of Mr. Brownlow as an old friend, and Sinclair racked his brains in vain to recall that name, among those the old man had talked of in his long prosings, to which Sinclair had paid very intermittent attention.

Sinclair sat for some minutes staring at the letter, picturing to himself what would have happened if it had been placed in the Vicar's hand and read by him, with Kit leaning on the back of his chair and reading the contents of the letter over his shoulder, with that perfect confidence of there being no secrets between them. He imagined the look of bewilderment that would have come into the Vicar's kind old face as he read, and how Kit's sweet eyes would have opened wider and wider, and the colour flush up into her cheeks. And if it should have been his unlucky fate to come in at that moment, as he had done more than once, when the family letters were being discussed, how the eyes of father and daughter would have

flashed upon him, demanding an explanation which he had not to give.

Those questioning eyes of Kit's, like the accusing angels, even in imagination were intolerable ; and he put up his hand involuntarily, as if to hide his eyes from them, or perhaps it was from the dazzle of the sun's rays on the sea.

Well, at any rate those eyes should never question him about that letter, and, with a sudden impulse, he tore it into a thousand pieces, with a sort of passionate feeling of resentment against the poor, flimsy bit of paper, as if he would like to revenge himself for the pain and perplexity it had cost him. And then, he threw the fragments, as a petulant child might have done, into the sea, and the little waves brought them back to his feet, tossing up, as if in malice, bits with words plainly discernible to his eyes sharpened by the fear of detection.

And then he began trying to recall the exact wording of the letter, to weigh the meaning of each expression, to estimate the extent of the recovery and the possibility of another relapse. Just a word will, sometimes, make all the difference in the sense and meaning of a passage. He wanted, too, to make out how much suspicion and distrust of him had crept into the old man's mind, and how much he had imparted to this new "old friend."

He would have given anything now to piece those fragments together, and read the whole again in cooler blood than he had at first—it might convey altogether a different meaning at a second reading.

But only those tantalizing scraps danced before his eyes on the turn of the wave, or were carried up to the pebbles at his feet worse than useless. He must have sat there a long time, for Tibby had had time to finish his lessons and hurry after him, and came plunging down the shingle behind Sinclair.

"Hullo!" he said, "what are you doing? Rob Chambers has come over, and we thought we might do something this afternoon: fishing, or a picnic, as it's such a jolly day. Are you feeling queer though?" — with a quick look up at Sinclair's face, which, even to such young eyes, looked a trifle careworn and haggard. "I tell you what it is" — confidentially. "I felt jolly sick this morning, while I was doing my sums, and I fancy it may have been tucking in at those strawberries yesterday. But, I say, look there! Is that a stamp? One of those American stamps! Oh, I say! have you been chucking a lot of them away? Christy and I are collecting, and we haven't had a new stamp since that letter of Uncle Philip's came. Here! just lend me your stick, and perhaps I can reach it. Father said I was not to bother you about stamps, but if you have any you don't want, and are just chucking them away like that, you might let me have them."

The stamp in question had caught Tibby's eye on a bit of rock a little way out, and to rescue such a treasure he would have gone straight in after it, had not a wholesome fear of Nurse's indignation prevented him.

But as he told Christy afterwards, "Mr. Sinclair

was awfully good-natured, and tried to reach it with his stick ; but just as he had moved it, the stupid thing tumbled off into the water among the weeds and stuff, and Mr. Sinclair said it was no use bothering, and that he had half a dozen, and more, in one of his pockets, that he would let us have when he turned them out."

"But it was a pity that he had to go over to Seadown that afternoon. He had some business, he said, he must see about—some letters that he got this morning, I fancy, for, as he came up the village, old Hobson called out to him. What a stupid old man he is, Kit. He's getting as blind as a bat, for he thought some letter of Sinclair's was directed to father, and he said Mrs. Stokes thought the same, when she sorted the letters. Sinclair was quite put out about it—he was quite angry ; and do you know, Kit," Tibby went on, quite confidentially, looking round to make sure that none of the others were within hearing, "do you know, I think that he swore at old Hobson. I'm not sure, but I think so. Shall I tell you what he said?"

"Certainly not," said Kit.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ANSWER.

"I deem'd him fool? Yea, so? or that in him
A something — was it nobler than myself? —
Seem'd my reproach."

TENNYSON.

HOWEVER disappointing it may have been to some of the party that Stuart Sinclair could not join the picnic tea on the beach, Rob Chambers was heartily glad of his absence, as he had much to say to Kit, and he had found out, that though she might not take much notice of, or talk to, Sinclair, any one else got but a very divided attention when he was present.

So when Tibby came in and announced that Sinclair had set off to walk to Seadown, Rob did not join in the chorus of lamentation that arose, nor for the matter of that, did Kit, though she asked —

"Did he know what a long way it is?"

"Oh yes, I told him," said Tibby; "and I said, if he must go, why didn't he ride Joe, as Rob had ridden him over here. But he said he didn't care to make an exhibition of himself; so I suppose he doesn't really know how to ride, and is afraid of falling off. I told him that Joe was very quiet, but he

said he would rather walk, and that he should be back, he hoped, to tea."

The fact was that Sinclair, after that second interview with Hobson, recognized the impossibility of receiving or sending letters at Lowburn without the fact being known and discussed, from one end of the place to the other ; and that if he were to write to Philip Brownlow, and post it at the little "everything" shop kept by Mrs. Stokes, his letter, most likely, would be looked over by half the village, and the address curiously spelt out by purchasers of a quarter of a pound of tea, or an ounce of tobacco.

That freedom from frequent postal deliveries, over which he had congratulated himself only that morning, was more than counterbalanced by the publicity that attended every letter in the delivery and despatch that took place daily.

He must write to Philip Brownlow without fail that day, so the only chance of doing so, unnoticed, was to write and post it in Seadown, which he hoped was a big enough place to ensure a certain amount of privacy.

The letter that he wrote in the coffee-room at the George was as follows : —

"DEAR OLD BOSS."

This had been Mr. Brownlow's name among the young fellows about the ranch, and even now, there was a prick of remorse in Sinclair's heart as he wrote the pleasant, familiar old name that conjured up before his mind's eye so much kindness and easy-going good nature. And then, too, there was the chance

that the words might never meet the eye for which they were written, if another relapse had followed the rally ; and to write lies to a dead man has a certain gruesome feeling, as if he might be looking over your shoulder all the time.

“ I hope by this time you have received the letter I wrote from London.”

The old postman's reflection came back to his memory as he wrote these words : “ 'Tis a wonder how them letters come from one end of the world to t'other, and it ain't once in a blue moon as one goes wrong ! ” Who was to say that this was not one of those exceptional occasions when a letter got lost in the post ?

“ I have been a bit anxious at not hearing from you, as Burnett did not give a very lively account of you when he wrote. Ask him to send me a line here, if you are not up to writing yourself. I hope, however, that I shall soon be able to get away from here ; for, though they are kindness and hospitality itself, and anxious that I should remain some time longer, this place is a bit dull, and I have my own people to look up ; and I want, too, to get back and help with your journey home, which I hope you may soon be able to attempt. Your brother was very much interested in all I was able to tell him about you, and, as I understood, intended to write. But I find he has not done so, and from what his daughter tells me, he seems to be getting rather forgetful. But then, of course, he is not as young as he was — a good bit your senior, I understand. Miss Kit asked

me not to talk much about business to him, as he gets so excited and confused ; so I have not mentioned your intentions as regards Miss Brownlow, hoping that you will soon be able to do so in person. Meanwhile, as the Vicar seems so shaky and his daughter anxious about him, I thought you would rather that I did not hurry away. Miss Brownlow agrees with me that any letter or telegram should come under cover to me, as it is important to save him as much as possible from unnecessary agitation."

In writing this letter, Sinclair had to take into consideration various circumstances. The old man might be dead, and this Guest, whoever he might be, would open the letter, and draw conclusions from it of his (Sinclair's) relations with the old man and his family. If, on the other hand, the recovery went on, and the old man read the letter himself, Sinclair was anxious to account for the delay in his return, which might be explained by the suggestion of the Vicar's enfeebled state of health. He weighed every word of it, and, even when it was directed and stamped, reopened it to make sure some sentence did not convey a different meaning to what he intended. That is the advantage of truth ; it does not need half the consideration and wisdom of a judicious lie.

He was curiously nervous, too, and it fidgeted him the waiter coming in and out of the room and passing close behind his chair ; for even if the man had glanced over his shoulder, no harm would have been done.

He started violently, and turned crimson, when, as

he dropped the letter in the post-box, some one touched him on the arm, and Dr. Chambers laughed.

"Hullo, Sinclair!" he said, "you want a dose — nerve- tonic or something. I shouldn't have thought you were troubled with nerves. Have you had some lunch? Come and have a bit with me. I have been detained, and am late; but there will be something in the shape of lunch ready at my place. Have you had enough of Lowburn and pastoral simplicity?"

So Sinclair went with Dr. Chambers, rather too elaborately explaining that he had come to Seadown on a matter of business, as if his presence there required apologetic explanation.

"I was wanting to see you," said the doctor; "as I thought you might be able to give me a tip about my boy Rob. I don't know if you have been inspiring him with the spirit of adventure, which has been singularly wanting in him hitherto, but he is quite keen on emigrating. To tell you the truth, Sinclair, it is rather a comfort to find any energy in Rob. Of course, I have long since given up any idea of his taking up my profession; but he will have to do something in these hard times and I have cudgelled my brains to think what he could turn his hand to, as it's no use reckoning on his head, as I dare say you have found out by this time."

"He seems a very good sort of fellow," Sinclair said politely.

"Yes, that is just it;" and the doctor's lips tightened a little. "But being a good sort of fellow does not push a man's way in the world, and up till now

he did not seem to have any ambition or wish to do anything for himself. But, anyhow, something or other — and I thought perhaps it might be your influence — has given him an impetus, and he came home last night red-hot on making a start."

"I don't think it could be anything to do with me," said Sinclair. "He doesn't favour me with much of his company."

"He is a little bit jealous of you," the doctor said, with a laugh. "He has had Miss Kit all to himself till you came, and I fancy he's desperately afraid of your cutting him out with her. I believe that's at the bottom of this sudden energy of his. Well, I let him cool down and sleep upon it, and at breakfast this morning talked it over. I'm afraid I got a little impatient. He is such an utterly impracticable sort of fellow. Your name turned up in the course of conversation, and I said, Why didn't he do as you had done, and go out to Canada or the States, and make his way as I take it you have?"

"Ah!" said Sinclair. One of those enigmatical ejaculations that might either mean assent or deprecation, or only interest and a desire to hear more. But, meanwhile, his mind in a flash was reviewing the past and future — the past with all his life in America, most of which, if the doctor had known of it, would hardly have made it an object of imitation for Rob; the future, with its plans and projects, for the well-being of which it might be quite as well to get Rob clear out of the way. Not that he anticipated any serious danger from him as regards Kit, but the fewer

influences he had to deal with, the simpler it would make it; and Rob's terrible, abrupt, straightforward truthfulness is an awkward element to cope with in an intrigue.

"He said," went on the doctor, "that he did not mind where he went, and that if you had got along out there, he did not see why he should not. On the last point I begged leave to differ from him, as I suppose brains count for as much out there as they do at home?"

"Well, I don't know," Sinclair said. "I don't think it's at all a bad idea of Rob's, and if I can be of any help I shall be delighted."

And the doctor made a note of his good nature and willingness to oblige, in contrast to Rob's surly distrust and dislike of the stranger.

"I should think some farm in Canada or Manitoba might suit him, and I dare say, when I came to look myself over, there might be some man I might give an introduction to. I have knocked up against a good many in my time."

"Well," went on the doctor, "I have been thinking over the idea too since Rob went, and think better of it than I did at first, when, I am afraid, I rather threw cold water on the scheme. And since I have been out, just now, it has occurred to my mind that there's a man over in Canada somewhere who's under a sort of obligation to me, and who would be glad to do a good turn for me. His name has slipped my memory, but I have his address put down in the other room. He has a big farm, and does a good

deal in the timber trade, and the last time I heard of him seemed to be getting on fairly well."

"It sounds the very thing," Sinclair said. "And if that fails, there are one or two chaps in Manitoba that I could write to, and who, if they could not take him themselves, would know others who might."

The doctor grew quite cheerful and interested at the prospect of starting Rob, a prospect which at breakfast that morning had only appeared in the light of a new worry and irritation and expense; and when Sinclair got up and declared he must set off on his tramp back to Lowburn, the doctor was quite loth to let him go, so full of useful information on emigration did he seem, and so easy did he make it all appear.

"I wish I could recollect the name of that man I am going to write to," Dr. Chambers said, as he stood at the door, taking leave of Sinclair. "Perhaps you may have come across him; but I don't think it very likely, as he has been mostly in Canada, and you know more of Manitoba and further west. The name's just at the tip of my tongue, though. Good-bye. Come over again soon; always pleased to see you."

And just as Sinclair turned the corner of the terrace, he heard the doctor hailing him.

"Sinclair! Hullo, there, Sinclair! — the name is ——"

But Sinclair was just out of reach of the name, which had suddenly flashed back into the doctor's

memory ; but he nodded and waved his stick as if he had heard, and went on his way, for what did it matter to him, the name of a farmer in Canada whom he was never likely to know?

But the name was " Frank Guest."

CHAPTER XV.

ORPHEUS.

"Love fits the soul with wings and bids her win
Her flight aloft, nor e'er to earth decline."

J. A. SYMONDS.

NOW that the Brownlows had grown so used to Stuart Sinclair's company, they found it was quite dull without him, and Rob, too, was unusually quiet and disinclined to enter into the more active parts of the picnic arrangements, and kept close to Kit's side, who had one of what the children called "her grown-up moods," and behaved with a somewhat exasperating sedateness.

"Rob is all very well in his way," Tibby said disparagingly, having altogether failed to rouse Rob to proper exertions over lighting the fire ; "but Sinclair's such a one for inventing all sorts of jolly improvements, while Rob goes jogging along with the same things over and over again."

Which criticism being overheard by Kit, she flew out at the young radical, declaring that she liked old ways best, and that these improvements very often spoil the fun.

"Yes," said Christy, who had not gained her heart's desire, the nest of boxes, one inside another, which

had been awarded, as Christy considered most unfairly, to Kit and Jack, who did not care for it. "We won't ever have partners at strawberry-picking again. Rob picked half the time into Kit's basket."

Certainly the picnic tea was a trifle flat, in spite of Tibby's attempt to introduce a new element into it, by forsaking the old circle of stones, where the fire had been lighted from time immemorial for boiling the kettle, and trying to do it in more orthodox gipsy fashion, by hanging the kettle from the three sticks. This attempt ended disastrously in the upsetting of the kettle and the extinguishing of the fire, and the humiliating necessity of accepting some boiling water from the coastguard station.

Nellie and Christy both turned on Tibby with "I told you so!" which was ungenerous, as, if it had been successful, they would certainly have claimed a share in the credit of having invented it. "But that's just like girls!" Tibby said, with all the contempt of the superior sex.

Matters might have become further strained, if Kit had not suggested shrimping, and Rob prevailed on the coastguard to provide two nets for the purpose.

And then at last Rob gained what he had been trying for all day, a quiet talk with Kit. It was indeed "at last," for it seemed to Rob as if the preparations for that shrimping would never be complete, such pinning up of petticoats and turning up of trousers, and scampering about of bare feet on the sand, and readjustment of the net, and small differ-

ences of opinion as to who should have the direction, and which way they should go, and how often they ought to take up the nets and examine the treasure trove. All these questions were brought to Kit to decide, and Jack even had to be convinced that the transparent-looking, hopping creatures in the net were the same as those solid brown or red objects from which he pinched off the heads, and conveyed the remains to his mouth with much bread and butter.

But at last they were safely off, and as the tide had gone down a long way since Sinclair sat there in the morning, on pretty nearly the same spot where Kit and Rob were sitting now, the children were well out of hearing, separated by a long stretch, first of all, of fine pebbles, over which bare feet had to go warily, and then firm-ribbed sand, over which they could scamper comfortably, and then shining and damp, with big pools and masses of seaweed-covered rocks, slippery and deceptive, and apt to plunge careless travellers in up to their middle, like Dr. Foster on his way to Gloucester in the old legend, up above carefully disposed petticoats or long-suffering trouser-legs.

The sun was getting low over the sea, and, as the children went, cast long shadows of them across the sands.

All round about Kit and Rob on the shingle were scattered the discarded boots and stockings of the shrimpers, and the kettle lying on one side as if exhausted by its efforts over tea-making.



Rob was sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin, and his hands clasped round them in one of his usual awkward attitudes; neither was Kit's position one of studied grace, though she could not, whatever she did, compare with Rob in ungainliness.

She was tossing pebbles at one of Tibby's boots, that had been swept away down the beach by the final boisterous departure of the shrimpers, but she turned round quickly to look at Rob when he suddenly began in that blunt, abrupt way he had, only with a fresh sound of purpose and intention in his voice which struck Kit's ear at once.

"I've been talking to the governor, Kit," he said, "or trying to, for he thinks I'm such a fool, you know, that he hasn't patience to listen to me. But I'm not such a fool now as he takes me for, and I want to make a start like other fellows, and earn my living. I don't see why I shouldn't do it, do you, Kit? There are lots of stupid fellows in the world besides me who make their way pretty well — don't get a lot of money, perhaps, like Sinclair, but enough to have a comfortable home, and ——"

"And what, Rob?"

The low sun was full on Rob's face, and it was very red, and the light was dancing in Kit's eyes, and I am afraid she laughed. But the laughter died out of her eyes the next minute, when she realized what Rob, in incoherent, blundering words, was trying to tell her, still sitting with his hands clasped round his knees, so tightly clasped that the knuckles showed white and prominent with the strain, and staring

straight before him to the sea and sun, which were beginning to prepare for the last gorgeous scene before the curtain of night falls, and the drama of day is over.

What Rob said is too rambling and ridiculous to be recorded here. I do not fancy half the love-passages in real life would read very coherently if they were taken down inexorably by a shorthand writer.

I wonder if any girl ever had a more modest lover than this Rob, who asked nothing in return for all that chaotic, blundering love he poured out of his simple, foolish young heart — no promise, no assurance of love in return, no words of gentle encouragement, not even a look; for, as he went on, Rob edged more and more away from her, till at last he was sitting almost with his back to her, and even a glance of most eloquent meaning would have only reached the back of his head and very sunburnt neck. As for a pressure of the hand, or, beyond everything, a kiss, Rob never dreamed of such a thing for a moment.

“Of course I’ve been awfully fond of you, Kit, ever since I can remember, but I didn’t know what a lot I felt about you till last night, and it seemed to come over me all of a sudden. But I felt that I couldn’t stop kicking about doing nothing any longer. I felt as if I should like to go straight away and work — work for you, you know, Kit — I could hardly wait to get home. I’m afraid I gave it to poor old Joe more than he relished to get him along, but I gave

him an extra feed when I got back. I tried to tell the pater about it, but he turned off crusty, and went away, and I don't think I slept a wink all night. I don't *think* I did, but I'm such a one to sleep, Kit, that I can't be sure. I had another go at the pater this morning, and it was he that put it into my head to go to Canada, though he snuffed it out again as soon as he had suggested it. But I don't feel as if it could be snuffed out so easily now, and I've been thinking it over all day. I don't know when I've thought so much as I have to-day; my head quite aches with thinking. But I mean to go, and at once; and I've come to say good-bye, and just to tell you, Kit, you know, all this rot that I've been bothering you with. It's not rot to me; it's jolly downright earnest——”

There was no laugh in Kit's eyes now, but the level rays of the sun were making tiny rainbows on large drops that gathered on her lashes, and dropped on Jack's stocking in her hand.

Perhaps it was as well that Rob's back was turned; Kit's tears, even when he was a small boy, affected him so sorely that he had even been known at sight of them to open his mouth like a letter-box, and emit hideous howlings out of pure heart-breaking sympathy. I do not suppose such a catastrophe was likely to have occurred now, but he would have suffered such desperate remorse for having been the cause of them, that I am afraid his newly-acquired manliness and fixed purpose, being so very juvenile yet—hardly, as you may say, fledged—might have

given way, and he might have relapsed into the pleasant, old, comfortable life of doing nothing but basking, as much as circumstances would allow, in the light of Kit's countenance.

"I want to know," he said at last, after a great deal that would no doubt have sounded very silly to an unprejudiced listener, put mostly in highly school-boy language, with undue use of the word awfully, and a great deal of repetition; but if the silly boyish nonsense had all been boiled down in the crucible of truth, I think there would have been found a good residuum of strong manly love, which is not always the case in more eloquent declarations—"I want to know if you think I am right?"

There was silence for a moment. Kit's heart, like her eyes, was too full to make speaking easy, and, as we have said, Rob's position did not allow of difficult pauses being helped out by looks.

She was trying to get her throat clear to say some kind, sensible, sisterly sort of words, so perhaps it was all the better for Rob that she did not succeed, for kind, sensible, sisterly words are poor food to fill a famished empty heart in another hemisphere.

"Kit!" he said imploringly. And to keep the sob in her throat from making itself heard, she got up, and, coming behind him, laid her hands on his shoulder, and stooping, dropped a sudden kiss, light as a rose petal, on the back of his neck. A tear dropped, too, on his close-cropped, sandy head, but he was unconscious of that; and perhaps, after all, the kiss was enough rapture for a humble, simple, loving heart.

And now any one would have supposed that Rob would have turned and have seen the soft colour dyeing Kit's face, and the tears in her eyes, and the trembling of the tender, little mouth, and would have repaid that kiss with interest, and perhaps demanded more, waxing bold from such encouragement. But no; not a bit of it. Rob got up, and, without turning once, set off slowly and heavily up the shingle and along the steep little bit of path from the beach leading through the break in the cliff towards Lowburn.

He only hesitated once, when a soft, sobbing little voice, saying, "Rob!" caught his ear; but it was only for a second that he paused, and then went doggedly on — like another Orpheus with another Eurydice tugging at his heart-strings behind; only this Orpheus felt as if he were going into hell instead of out of it, and leaving all the world's sunshine and flowers behind.

I think if Rob had yielded to that desperate temptation to turn, and, as his deceitful heart told him, have just one last look at Kit, he would certainly never have gone, and much of this story have remained unwritten, or, at any rate, have been written very differently.

How curiously it strikes one sometimes, the trifles which influence large matters — how a pebble will turn the course of a stream, or the loss of a minute cost a life, or a jest overthrow an empire.

That dejected back of Rob's plodding doggedly up the path, as seen by Kit's tearful eyes, certainly had

turned the course of a stream — that capricious little stream of true love, that not only, as the proverb tells us, never runs smooth, but has all sorts of queer little turns and twists, very difficult sometimes for the geographer of the fair country through which it flows to trace on the map of romance, still more to account for.

And perhaps we might also say that it had lost a life, and overthrown an empire ; for it struck a death-blow to Kit's preference for Sinclair, which up to then had been waxing strong and vigorous, and overthrew the empire which he was beginning to hold over her heart.

I think it is more than likely that if this Orpheus of ours had turned, he would have lost his Eurydice as completely as did the hero of mythology, and that daily comparison with Sinclair might have led to giving undue weight to outward defects of appearance and manner, and undervaluing the great, solid worth of truth and sincerity and honest love.

Only I wish Rob could have known when he went away so heavily, leaving, as he thought, all worth having behind him, that he was taking Kit's heart to the other end of the world, or the bottom of the sea, or wherever he was bound for.

Shrimping is an enthralling pursuit, and the sun had slipped down behind the horizon, leaving rich purples and browns and orange tints in place of the crimson and gold of his setting, when the shrimpers reappeared, needless to say, wet to the crowns of their heads, and cold and a little bit quarrelsome.

Jack had cut his foot with a bit of stone, and wanted to be pitied, though he was not quite sure which foot it was that required treatment.

“Where’s Rob?”

It is so difficult to drag on stockings over cold and only partially dried feet, and Tibby was inclined to think it mean of Rob to have gone off without lending a hand to carry the basket and the kettle home. One of Jack’s stockings, too, had mysteriously disappeared, and could not be found. Kit remembered having it in her hand when Rob began talking, and afterwards a tear rolling down on to a particularly badly done darn which she had noticed, and for which she intended to reproach Nellie as being her handiwork.

Yes; and it had been in her hand when she got up and put her hands on Rob’s shoulders — a memory that brought a hot flush over face and neck; and — yes, surely! — as Rob walked away there was something dangling from his shoulder. She must have left Jack’s stocking there, and Rob walked off with it unconsciously.

Poor, dear old Rob! there was always something a little bit comic about him even in his most earnest moments; and the idea brought a faint little smile into Kit’s face, which was sadder than it had ever been before, as she searched about half-heartedly for Jack’s stocking, with that young hero hopping on his one clad foot after her.

“Never mind, Jack,” she said. “I dare say we shall find it at home. Put on your shoe.”

But it was not to be found along the homeward path, or at the Vicarage ; so Rob had carried it off. And when Kit read of knights wearing their ladies' favours in their caps, richly embroidered by their fair fingers with gold and pearls, she thought of this true knight of hers, carrying off an old stocking of Jack's, not even darned by Kit's hand, but disgracefully cobbled by Nellie.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ABSENT.

“ And it was better, youth
Should strive, thro’ acts uncouth
Toward making, than repose on aught found made.”

BROWNING.

STUART SINCLAIR told himself again that evening that he had been too precipitate with Kit the day before, for he was uneasily conscious of a change in her. There was too much depending on his winning Kit to make him venture, as he otherwise might have done, “to put it to the touch, to win or lose it all.”

After all, he told himself, he had only known her a few days, and he had made good progress in the short time. There were no rivals in the field; or, if Rob Chambers were reckoned a rival, he was not one to be afraid of, and there seemed every probability of his clearing right out of the road if he persisted in this sudden whim of going to America.

He had met Rob on his return from Lowburn, jogging along on Joe, and there was a very down-cast look about both horse and rider which did not impress Stuart with any fear of him as a successful rival.

When he reached the Vicarage, to which the picnic party had not yet returned, he found the Vicar greatly perturbed about Rob, who had suddenly appeared in the study about an hour before, in a strange and excited condition very unlike himself, and had bidden the Vicar good-bye in much agitation, as he was going to start for America immediately.

"I don't know what has put it into his head, unless it is your stories, Sinclair," the Vicar said. "And I don't think he knows what he is going to do when he gets there. I hope Dr. Chambers won't think we have been setting him on; and, of course, it's not a thing to do without due deliberation, and he spoke as if he might be going to-morrow, and would not certainly be able to come over again to say good-bye to us. He has been here so much that he seems almost one of the family, and I know the children will miss him dreadfully; he was just like an elder brother to them."

Sinclair said he had heard something about it from the doctor that afternoon, and that he was inclined to think it was a move in the right direction, though it was certainly not due to any suggestion from him (Sinclair) as Rob had not been very sociable, and they had had but little to do with one another.

"It appears that the doctor has friends out in Canada. I know a friend of his slightly, a doctor in New York, who gave me an introduction to him; but he has others, he says, in Canada, farming, and

I should think Rob Chambers just the sort of fellow to do on a farm where he would have to rough it a bit."

As he spoke, Sinclair was thinking what a fortunate thing for him it was that America is such a much vaster matter than English people realize, who imagine it at best another England in size, and at worst something like the Isle of Wight, where you can hardly fail to run up against any one you know; though, of course, every one would disclaim such ridiculous ignorance. There would be room there for millions of Rob Chambers, without any fear of one of them running up against a sick old man at New York, even though he also could be multiplied by thousands.

Sinclair laughed at the idea of Rob's hurried departure, and not having time to come over to say good-bye, wondering inwardly whether it signified a snub from Kit, which might keep him away from Lowburn, even if it did not send him off straight away across the Atlantic.

"I don't think his father would at all fall in with such a head-over-heels proceeding. He's a very leisurely old gentleman, as I found to my cost to-day, as I should have been back an hour sooner if he had hurried up a little more over his lunch. I wouldn't mind making a small wager that Master Rob turns up here again to-morrow."

"Well, I hope he may," Mr. Brownlow said, greatly relieved, "I was thinking, if I could get over to Seadown myself to-morrow morning to see him, as he

seems like a boy of my own, and I should not like him to go without a word of advice."

And just then the party from the beach came in, and none of them except Kit seemed to know anything about Rob's intended departure. Indeed, Tibby quite expected to find him at the Vicarage, and was prepared to attack him for having sneaked off without helping with the kettle, which, when Tibby carried it, and especially when he did so unwillingly, imparted liberal mementos of its company on knickerbockers and jacket-sleeves, and, even this evening, on the tip of Tibby's nose.

Jack, too, was anxious to inquire if Rob had taken one of his stockings in mistake for his pocket-handkerchief, though Mr. Brownlow assured him that grown up people's pocket-handkerchiefs were not as a rule in such a condition as to be mistaken for a black stocking.

Kit did not say much, Stuart noticed, and, when Nurse brought in the lamp, he fancied her eyes looked as if they had been crying.

"Did he say anything to you, Kit, about this idea of going to America?"

"Yes; he said he thought of going, but he did not say when."

Kit was very much occupied, apparently, in helping Nurse over some arrangement of the china-pantry, and so was conveniently out of the way when the family first realized the appalling idea that Rob had suddenly disappeared, for more than a temporary absence, from his corner in the family life.

He seemed a sort of necessary part of existence. They could as well imagine coming down to breakfast one morning and finding no dining-table, or glancing out of the window and seeing no mulberry tree on the lawn.

They had found fault with him often enough that very afternoon. Tibby penitently remembered having done so over the tea, and again, not ten minutes ago, about the kettle; but so had they often complained of the dining-room table being a great deal too small, or called the mulberry tree a stupid old thing because the fork where the thrushes nest was, was too high to reach comfortably; but that did not at all signify that they were not the very best and jolliest old table and mulberry tree in creation.

Christy wept openly, and declared that Rob was her partner over strawberry picking, and she would not have any one else — with warlike glances of defiance at Stuart, who was guiltless of having made any proposals to assume that coveted position.

"Les absents ont toujours tort," the proverb says; but I think it is sometimes the other way, especially when the absent have only just departed, and the poor present have to bear all sorts of little unkind thrusts and depreciating comparison with those no longer there.

Christy could be comforted by a seat on father's knee and the loan of his pocket-handkerchief; but Nellie shed a few surreptitious tears behind the window curtain, and had to sniff and swallow them away as best she could, being, as she scornfully

told Christy, too old to cry about nothing like a baby.

But when they were both in bed, and the candle was out, Nellie's pride gave way, and a very quavering voice inquired —

“Christy, are you asleep?”

And receiving the encouraging answer, “No, are you?” Nellie invited Christy to come across into her bed, as she was quite sure she should not sleep at all all night, she was so miserable; and Christy — who, truth to tell, was already beginning to enter the borderlands of sleep — felt equally sure that she was too unhappy about Rob to close her eyes, got into Nellie's bed, and they lay with wet cheeks pressed close together, and said how horrid it would be without Rob, and how fond they were of him, and how they liked him a hundred times better than Stuart.

“And, do you know,” Nellie said, indignantly, “I don't believe Kit cares one bit about his going away; she hardly stopped to listen when father was telling us about it, and kept fussing about the pantry, when I'm sure Nurse didn't want her, and she laughed at all the silly things Mr. Sinclair said at supper. I think it's horrid of her when Rob is always so awfully nice to her.”

And Christy quite agreed, and, as she lay with wide open eyes looking into the darkness, she felt very grown-up and dignified at being taken into Nellie's confidence, and a little bit sorry for herself to think how pale and red-eyed she would be next morning, and how father would say, “Why, Christy, what's

the matter with my little white mouse?" And, of course, she would not be able to eat any breakfast, and she rather wished Rob could know what she was enduring on his account, and — why? How very extraordinary! There was Nurse pulling up the blind, and the sun was pouring in at the window, and Nurse was saying, "I don't know what you want to sleep together for, this hot weather, it makes you get so 'ot and sleep so 'eavy." And Christy crept out of bed, feeling rather crestfallen, but consoled by Nellie having done exactly the same.

And that heartless and ungrateful Kit had come into the girl's room, not very long after Nellie had commented so severely upon her fickleness, and had found them both asleep, and had guessed what the reason was of the two heads on one pillow, and of the drops still bright on Nellie's long lashes, and her own eyes filled up with sympathy.

The light burned longer than usual, Stuart noticed, in the little window among the roses, but, after a time, Kit too slept the sleep of the young, which not even love troubles can often disturb.

Jack had been stirring when she bent over his crib, and put up an arm to clasp her neck.

"Kit," he said, "I've been dreaming of Rob. Do you think he will ever come back?"

"Oh yes, Jack. I hope so."

"Kit, I can't recollect if I said my prayers."

"Oh, Jack!" — reproachfully.

"I'm almost quite sure I did, but — Kit!"

"Well?"

"I feel kind as if I should like to say them again. It wouldn't be wrong, would it, to say them twice over in one night, if I really have said them before?"

"Not at all wrong."

"And it isn't wrong, is it, to alter them just a little bit sometimes?"

It was not very long since Jack had said them aloud, and did not feel responsible for slight deviations.

"I mean, put in another name sometimes. No," in answer to a doubtful look in Kit's face, "it's not Bogey. I know you said before there was no harm in putting Bogey in, but perhaps it was better not. It's Rob. I thought if he was going away where all those bears and snakes and things are, that Mr. Sinclair tells us about, I should like to ask God to take care of him."

"Yes, dear. And look, Jack, I'm just going to say my prayers, so we might say them together, mightn't we?"

Jack's devotions were over sooner than Kit's, but he was not quite asleep when she rose from her knees.

"That's right," he said contentedly. "I didn't quite know where to put Rob in, so I put him next to you. Where did you put him, Kit?"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRESENT.

"It's a' for the apple he'll nourish the tree,
It's a' for the hiney he'll cherish the bee ;
My laddie's sae meikle in love wi' the siller,
He canna hae luv to spare for me."

BURNS.

ROB did not make his appearance at Lowburn next day, as Stuart Sinclair had confidently predicted he would, and as all the Brownlows earnestly hoped.

Nellie and Christy were hard at work at every spare moment, working farewell book-marks for him ; and Tibby had nobly resolved to give him some highly-prized wren's eggs, so fragile that Tibby would not allow Jack to stare too hard at them for fear they should break, and was not to be deterred by Sinclair's suggestion that they would not make good travellers.

"I expect he thought I should give them to him instead of to Rob," Tibby confided to the girls, with fine sarcasm. So it may be seen that Stuart was not at a premium just then at Lowburn.

Nellie and Christy were so absorbed in beads and perforated card and coloured silk, that they could hardly spare a look for Stuart ; and though Kit was

kind and courteous, he fancied there was a change in her, and that she avoided any *tête-à-tête* with him.

Mr. Brownlow, too, was occupied with his Sunday sermon, but not too occupied, Stuart observed, to get up and come to the window every time the gate opened in the expectation of Rob's arrival.

It was certainly a little exasperating; and if there had not been so much dependent upon his watchful presence at Lowburn, he would have been inclined to go up to London for a few days for a little change and recreation; for, after all, Lowburn was a dull little place, and a fellow gets a bit tired of Arcadian simplicity.

Somehow nothing seemed quite the same since that letter had been opened and the other one written. The place was dull; the simplicity irksome; the old Vicar twaddly; the children tiresome; the villagers boorish; the rose he picked had a caterpillar at its heart. Even Kit did not give him entire satisfaction; her dress was badly made, and her hair unbecomingly arranged. When she was his wife, there should be a decided improvement in these respects.

When she was his wife! His thoughts rushed on to that brilliant time, golden with the old man's money, in which, I am afraid, Kit's presence contributed but little to the attractions of the prospect; though, with Rob, that presence alone was enough to make the future too dazzlingly bright for his humble eyes to dwell upon.

With Stuart, Kit was only a means to an end — a pleasant, acceptable means, luckily; for if she had

been ugly and repulsive, the end must have been attained all the same. With Rob, she was the end, and such an end as could inspire efforts to arrive at it that would have seemed incredible formerly to Rob himself, and to all who knew him well — efforts and energy and common sense which Dr. Chambers would have declared altogether wanting in Rob's composition. But love is such an unknown quantity that when once it enters into a calculation it is impossible to prophesy what the result will be; when the spirit of love broods over the face of the still waters of a heart, a new-created world springs up where all seemed chaotic.

With Stuart there was no such unknown quantity to deal with, so it was easy to reckon that Stuart Sinclair, with Kit as his wife, would be much the same as Stuart Sinclair for the past ten years, only so far different as a man with money in his pocket differs from one who has none; and I am afraid that difference is not, as a rule, for the better.

The children agreed at dinner that they were rather glad Rob had not come over, as it would give them more time to finish their book-marks; and Mr. Brownlow hoped that Rob would think better of his intention, and try and find some occupation nearer home.

“I quite approve of his wish to do something; but it is a pity to rush off to the other end of the world before making sure that there is no opening in England. I expect it was your having been so successful, Sinclair, that made him think of it; but I could tell

him of others who have not found emigrating such a sure road to fortune."

And the Vicar gave a little sigh, thinking of his brother who, as he sadly surmised, had drawn nothing but blanks in life's lottery.

"Have you had any news of my brother lately, Sinclair? I must write to him when I have time. I ought to have done so before; but it's curious how much less time one seems to have for anything as one grows older. I suppose one is slower over doing things. If Rob Chambers really is going to America, I wonder if it would be any help to him to go to Philip — eh?"

For Stuart had given a little involuntary exclamation. Of all catastrophes, this would be the worst, and he had been congratulating himself on the hundreds of miles that would lie between Philip Brownlow and Rob Chambers, even if the same continent contained them.

But Mr. Brownlow interpreted the exclamation and the slight hesitation on Stuart's usually fluent tongue, as meaning that Philip had made such a bad business of it on his own account, that he was not likely to be much help to any one else.

"No, I expect not. Poor Phil would hardly be a guide, philosopher, and friend for a boy like Rob."

"Anyhow," Stuart said, with that hearty manner which seemed to ring so true to the uninitiated hearer, "he was an uncommonly good friend to me. I heard from a friend of mine yesterday that Mr. Brownlow was better, but not up to the voyage yet; and that

he was going out of town for a bit for a change before he makes a start. He didn't say where he had gone, which is a nuisance, as I want to write to him myself, as I know he will be keen to hear all about you; but I must wait now till I get his address. I know what 'forwarded letters' mean out there. You may just as well save your pen and ink and trouble, for any chance of the letter reaching its destination."

"Ah!" said the Vicar, with a sensible expression of relief settling down on his kind old face. "Then perhaps I had better wait, too. You'll be sure and tell me when you know his whereabouts?"

"I dare say I may by next mail. But I think I shall have to be moving off in a day or two."

"Moving off?"

There was no mistaking the honest hospitality implied by the consternation with which the Vicar received this suggestion, and such of the family as were within earshot—for the dinner-talk had been continued out in the garden, joined in very heartily in spite of their absorption in the departing hero, Rob, and their newly awakened conviction of his superiority to Sinclair.

Even Kit's quick look up at him expressed a wistful little appeal, which had a very soothing effect on Stuart's mind, and made everything look prettier and pleasanter and more attractive than it had done since yesterday.

"I had no notion of taxing your hospitality to this extent," he said. "When I came over that Sunday it was only for a call; and here have I been

staying for over a fortnight. Pretty cool, that, for a stranger ! ”

“ Well ; all I can say,” replied the Vicar, “ is what I have said before, that you are heartily welcome to stay as long as you can put up with us. There’s nothing very lively for you here. It’s a dull little place, I know ; and now we shall not even have Rob Chambers coming over to bring us news of the outer world. But still, if you don’t mind the dulness and the society of an old man and a pack of children, we’re only too glad to have you — eh, Kit ? ”

And Kit smiled a cordial assent, which made the end less clear and hard and distinct, in the matter of dollars, before Stuart’s mind, and the means to that end almost sweet and fair enough to be worth winning for herself alone.

The sunlight between the mulberry leaves fell so tenderly on the little head bending over the needle-work, bringing out the gold in the soft rings on her forehead, with an effect that the most finished French maid or hairdresser could hardly have produced with consummate skill, and dappled with light and shade the folds of the washed-out cotton frock, and the slender outline of the young figure, childish yet in its slimness, with a tender grace that a court milliner might have studied in vain.

“ You can’t think,” Stuart said, “ what a home like this is to a man who has knocked about the world as I have. The quiet and rest are doing me more good than I can tell you ; and, really, if I’m not putting you to inconvenience, and you’re not getting tired to

death of me, there's nothing I should like better than to stop on a bit longer. Only you must make use of me just as you would of Rob Chambers, and let me fetch and carry and run errands. Couldn't I take Tibby's lessons, or dig in the garden, or ring the church bell? I can tell you I've turned my hand to a good many things in my time, and I flatter myself I'm handy at most. Now, Miss Kit, isn't there something I can do for you this afternoon? I'm just longing for a job! Or for you, sir?" — to the Vicar. "I couldn't undertake to write your sermon: that *is* above my capabilities: but anything short of that, I'm altogether at your service to perform."

He had quite recovered his gay spirits and satisfaction with himself and the world, and was on good terms with all the family again — helping Christy collect the beads, which had an awkward way of upsetting and dispersing over the floor at frequent intervals, and counselling Tibby as to the best way of packing his fragile present to Rob, in the middle of which important business the Vicar called to him from the study window.

"Sinclair! I'm going to take you at your word, and ask you to do a job for me."

"With all the pleasure in life."

"Will you go over to Seadown and see when Rob Chambers is really going?"

"To hear is to obey," Sinclair said, with an elaborate salaam.

"I feel a little bit anxious about the boy. He was so excited and queer last night; and I really want to

have a talk with him before he goes, as I don't fancy there is much confidence between him and his father, and I feel a sort of responsibility about him."

"And oh, Mr. Sinclair! if you see him, do ask if he likes a blue or red ribbon best. You need not tell him what it is for, as we want the book-mark to be quite a surprise."

Tibby wanted some particular sort of liquid glue, only to be procured at Seadown, and Jack some tin-tacks — having been seized with a carpentering mania, which played wild havoc with his fingers.

So Stuart Sinclair had a variety of commissions in his new character of errand-boy; but he lingered a minute by Kit's side.

"Is there nothing I can do for you?" he asked, and his voice sank to a tone that brought the colour up into her cheeks. "I should like to bring something that would please you."

"Then you had better bring Rob back with you," Tibby interposed. "I'm sure Kit would like that better than anything."

And Sinclair went off with a laugh, though he told himself that he did not see anything at all amusing in Tibby's remark, and felt that these small boys ought to be kicked when they tried to be funny.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LEAVE-TAKING.

"Stand not upon the order of your going,
But go at once."

SHAKESPEARE.

ROB had actually gone. People who habitually let the grass grow under their feet will occasionally do things with startling suddenness.

Dr. Chambers had treated it at first as rather a stupid joke, when Rob came in the night before with a paper in his hand containing a list of dates of departure of the American line of steamers from Southampton to New York, and, pointing to one leaving the following day at noon, announced his intention of going by her. But as he stuck doggedly to the point, and was not to be deterred by any objections as to uncertainty of getting a berth, need of an outfit, etc., Dr. Chambers began to debate within himself if it would not be as well to strike while the iron was hot, and let Rob go before he cooled down to the very lack-lustre, inert condition which was his normal condition.

At any rate, if he only went for a month or two on a visit to Frank Guest, it might brighten him up a bit, and rub off some of the corners that made

him a daily and hourly irritation to his father. If it did not do him any good, it was not likely to do him harm. He had never got into any mischief at school, and, though sometimes Dr. Chambers had felt that he would welcome some boyish escapade, just to show that there were brains to devise even mischief, there was a solid comfort in feeling that Rob's heavy, lumbering craft might launch out into life's ocean with good chance of weathering storms that might overwhelm or seriously damage smarter and swifter little vessels.

So Rob, anyhow, had won this somewhat negative good opinion of his father's, though he was quite unconscious of having inspired anything but contempt.

"You must clearly understand," Dr. Chambers said, with that tightening of the lips and cold incisive tone that from Rob's earliest years had always made him writhe like an insect on a pin, "that if I give way to this absurd freak of yours, and find the money for your journey, it's for the first and last time. I assure you I can't afford the luxury of a son with a taste for travel; and if you come back, as I fully expect you will at the end of a few months, you must make up your mind to remain at home. I will write to-night to my friend in Ontario, and ask him to do what he can for you. I'm sure he'll do his utmost to oblige me, but I shall not be surprised if it does not come to much. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, even to oblige a friend."

The poor sow's ear in question listened humbly, not even getting redder than was its wont. It was so great a thing to have gained his point, which seemed unlikely at starting; and, firm as Rob's purpose was, it could hardly have been carried out in direct opposition to his father's wishes.

"If your plans are not already matured, and if you care for any advice on the subject, I should advise you to go straight away to Guest's; my letter will reach there before you. If it were not, apparently, so necessary for you to make such an immediate start, I should have thought it would have been better to go from Liverpool to Montreal. But, of course, you know your own business best, and I have no wish to interfere with superior wisdom."

It was curious that in Dr. Chambers' long experience of Rob, he had not found out how worse than useless sarcasm was in dealing with him. You would have thought that half the amusement of that sort of raillery was finding an antagonist worthy of one's steel, who will give thrust for thrust, and parry and return the blow, instead of standing up as poor Rob did, patiently receiving it all without even an effort at self-defence, much less any attempt at return. When Greek meets Greek, one can easily understand, there comes the tug of war; but when Greek meets — Chinese, shall we say? there does not seem much interest in the contest.

"About funds?" Dr. Chambers went on. "For I suppose funds are necessary; though, as you have not mentioned them, perhaps you do not require them?"

An indistinct murmur of assent came from Rob, as Dr. Chambers got out a cash-box from the small safe in the corner of the consulting-room, where the conversation was going on. Rob, sitting uneasily in the patient's chair, connected in his mind with painful memories of dental operations, and of the lancing of a gathered thumb, which, however seemed insignificant anguish to what he was enduring now.

Dr. Chambers sat for some time, studying his banker's book and fingering some notes and cash in the box ; and Rob sat on thorns, longing to decline to accept any of that sorely begrudged money, and wondering if he could work his way to America before the mast, or in any humble capacity, but remembering the helpless condition to which he had been reduced by sea-sickness on the only occasion when he had gone in a steamer.

"Well," the doctor said at last, "I suppose I must manage it somehow, though, I can tell you, it's not so easy as you seem to think. It means giving up— But never mind! My personal concerns generally have to go to the wall, and have never been of any interest to you, so I need not trouble you with them now. Here are fifty pounds. I conclude that will be enough to take you out, and I will send the same amount to Guest in a mail or two, to draw as you want it, or to pay your journey home. Steerage?"—as Rob indistinctly deprecated the amount. "No, thank you. I am not very thin skinned, but I don't fancy exposing myself to the kind remarks people would make if you went out as a steerage passenger

Well, I suppose that's about the end of our business, and we may as well go to bed, especially as you are making an early start to-morrow. Eight-o'clock train, eh? Then, I suppose I shall not see you before you go, so I will bid you good-bye as well as good night."

Dr. Chambers had turned to put the cash-box back into the safe from whence he had taken it, and tossed these farewell words over his shoulder to Rob as ungraciously as he had given the notes a few minutes before.

Rob had risen, and he stood by the table, leaning on it with his hands, in one of which was crumpled up the notes his father had handed to him. He was looking wistfully across the table at the handsome, well-dressed, dignified figure — so wistfully that one would have thought the look might have found its way through the smooth, elegant exterior to the real little man within, who, after all, was Rob's father, and so would have had a little feeling at parting from his only son. But that polished, artificial, outer surface thickens and hardens as time goes on, if it is never relaxed; so it may have needed something sharper than poor Rob's wistful look to penetrate it, and perhaps he did not see it, and there was no doubt, either, that he was a little bit deaf — though he only owned to it on convenient occasions — so we may give him credit for really not hearing when Rob said, "Father!"

And it may have been real also — though when a person is consistently artificial, you begin to distrust the reality of his most ordinary actions — that he

thought Rob had gone, and felt surprise, on turning round, to find him still there.

"Hullo!" he said, "I thought our durbar had come to an end. Is there anything further to say? You have the money."

And Rob turned and went upstairs.

"Do you mean to say you were none of you down to give Mr. Rob some breakfast before he started? Upon my word, a pretty state of things!"

People are always more angry with others when the blame involves, or ought to involve, themselves.

"I never did see master in such a towering passion," the maids told one another next morning. In a house without a mistress, early rising is not often to be met with among the servants; and none of Dr. Chambers' maids were down when Rob let himself out of the front door, with his portmanteau in his hand, and walked off in the direction of the station.

"How was we to know as he was going, when he hadn't said one word to us about it, but just asked where his portmanteau was kept last night?"

"And there's all them socks, as Emma did ought to have mended, lying about in her drawer for months, and Master Bob hardly one to his foot half the time!"

"It's all that lazy gal!" the cook said of the kitchen-maid, with the sublime feeling that cooks were too invaluable to be blamed. "She'd sleep all day, if it weren't for the milkman; and as for that alarum, she snores all the louder, for I've heard her when the 'orrid thing woke me out of pretty near my

first sleep, being a poor sleeper, and often not closing an eye all night."

"Nasty old cat!" the kitchen-maid grumbled *sotto voce*; "it's as much as my life's worth, if I don't take up her cup o' tea puncshal at eight. Talk of heathen slaves indeed; it's nothing to me!"

So each of the servants blamed another, and Dr. Chambers blamed them all, though the real sufferer, Rob, had blamed nobody, as he shut the door behind him on the house that had been, it is true, a poor sort of home, and yet touched that curious, deep-seated feeling that exists in most of us, and often with very little reason.

So Rob had to blink his eyes to clear them from a certain mist that clouded them as he took a last look at the brass plate on the door and the green outside shutter, though neither at door nor window was there any friendly face to bid him farewell and God-speed on his journey.

"And, please, sir, here's something as Mr. Rob have left on his table."

Hawkins, the parlour-maid, was burning to know the contents of the badly done-up parcel directed in Rob's scrawling handwriting to his father; and Dr. Chambers, suspecting the curiosity, merely said, "Very well, you can put it down," and went on reading the newspaper serenely.

"As if," Hawkins said, with the indignation of baffled curiosity, "poor Master Rob weren't his own flesh and blood, and gone off, as no one can't tell if he'll ever come back!"

The packet contained three of the £10 notes Dr. Chambers had given him the night before.

"Beg your pardon, sir," Hawkins said, returning hastily from the kitchen stairs, where a sound had reached her that she thought justified an immediate return; "I thought I heard you call."

Dr. Chambers was standing by the window, putting something carefully into his pocket, and on the floor lay the paper and string of that untidy packet, and the chair on which he had been sitting was upset.

"I am not in the habit of calling," he said; "I generally ring the bell when I require your services."

CHAPTER XIX.

LONG A-DOING.

“ Yet, Shepherd, what is Love, I pray ?
It is yea, it is nay,
A pretty kind of sporting fray ;
It is a thing will soon away.”

SIR WALTER RALEIGH.

A MONTH had passed since Rob took his precipitate departure, and August had come, and the harvest was being gathered in, and the beautiful waving corn cut and bound in sheaves, and carted away to the rickyard, leaving the stubble fields bare, but with a certain beauty of their own, in contrast with the heavy, dark-green foliage of the trees and the turnip-fields.

Just about Lowburn there are not many cornfields ; it is principally pasture-land, so harvest is not such an anxious time as hay-making, and there is no arable land on the glebe to call forth the enthusiasm of the parishioners.

“ And a good thing, too,” Nurse used to say, “ or we should never have done cutting bread-and-butter for all the idle folk who choose to play with a reaping-hook ! ”

Sinclair was still at Lowdown. He had gone away for a day or two, but had come back looking so ill

that, even if the whole family had not been unfeignedly glad to see him, they would have been bound to receive him kindly and make much of him.

"I've come back like a bad penny, Miss Kit," he said, "though I am ashamed to go on trespassing on your hospitality. I thought I was more of a man than I really am, for you know I was pretty bad last year, and the doctors over there thought I was a bit of a miracle to pull round at all. But I find even now that I can't afford to rough it, and you've spoilt me so by your kindness; and, by Jove! when I was taken bad in London, I felt such a baby as if I could almost have cried to come home. You certainly have the power of making a fellow feel at home, so you had better mind what you are about, or you may get more of such lazy good-for-nothings imposing on your kindness."

There was such a general chorus of welcome and satisfaction at his return, that no one, except, perhaps, Stuart himself, would notice if one was not quite so hearty and effusive as the others, and, of course, sometimes those that feel the most are the least demonstrative.

Kit was kindness itself, and there was something almost maternal in the way she took care of him, and would not let him sit in draughts or overtire himself, and plied him with cups of milk or beef-tea.

Nurse chuckled to herself, and winked at her own reflection in the little cracked glass that hung in the pantry, not being on reciprocal chuckling or winking terms with any one else. She knew well enough

what all these little gentle courtesies meant, and, as she was quite sure they were appreciated, she highly approved.

"Girls is so silly sometimes," she told herself, "and if they fancies a man, they're too shame-faced to say a good word to him, and to turn their shoulders if he as much as looks at them. But Miss Kit ain't that sort; she's more sense. And it ain't a case of making herself cheap neither, for it's easy to see he just worships the ground she steps on, bless her!"

Lookers-on, they say, see most of the game, and a loving looker-on of her own sex like Nurse should have been in a good position for judging of Kit's feelings.

But Stuart did not feel so confident, and looked back with a puzzled regret to the earlier days of their acquaintance, when Kit was not nearly so outwardly complaisant; when she sheltered herself behind Nellie and Christy; when the colour flushed up into her face when her eyes met his, and she took pains to avoid his glance, and affected not to listen when he was talking to the others; when there were small misunderstandings and reconciliations—mere matters of looks or, at most, half a dozen words; when trifles were beginning to have a special meaning for these two; when a certain withered flower was in his button-hole for a couple of days, in spite of Nellie's and Christy's remonstrances and offers of replacing it with the choicest blossoms in the garden, and Kit knew why it was there; and there were ever so many

other of the little insignificant, and yet significant, details that attend the opening of love's sweet song.

But after that meeting at the gate — for Stuart did not in any way connect the change in Kit with Rob's departure, but blamed his own precipitancy in the matter — Kit, when she had recovered her ruffled self-possession, had assumed a pleasant, frank manner that charmed even while it puzzled and annoyed him — a sort of good comradeship that was almost sisterly, and, when he came back in an invalidish condition, motherly.

She did not now avoid the *tête-à-têtes* with him, and call Christy or Jack to the rescue if one seemed imminent. She neither avoided nor sought his gaze, and when she met it, smiled back with kindly friendliness without growing crimson, except now and then, when the meaning in Stuart's eyes was not capable of being misunderstood, or when his voice sank into that tender tone that once had thrilled her powerfully and not altogether painfully. Now, if the colour rose, it was more the flush of vexation, and her eyes went back to her work with more of impatience than of shy, startled feeling.

Stuart was puzzled, but not discouraged, for he had never found a woman yet who was not to be won by one means or another; and this was a simple, unsophisticated country girl, who did not know the power of her own good looks, and was absolutely ignorant of the fortune which added so greatly to her attractions. And here she was, in this out-of-the-way, dead-alive village, and no rival of any sort or condi-

tion disputing the field with Sinclair. It would be a poor business if a man of the world like he was, with such tremendous odds, too, depending on the result, could not woo and win this little Kit Brownlow, who liked him already with a liking that would soon ripen into love. Perhaps it added to the zest of the wooing that it was not quite so easy as it had appeared at first; and if every moment had not been so precious, it would have been interesting to Sinclair to play this shy fish, and let her take her time and run away down stream as far as she liked, till the moment when he could reel her in, surely and safely, without resistance, and land the glittering, silvery prisoner at his feet. He never really doubted but what the line was there, strong and firm, by which he could draw her to himself at last — the slight fine line of love, from which she could not break away, though just now, from some girlish whim or caprice, she chose to ignore it.

But fishermen will tell you that you have little chance of landing your fish if you are in a hurry, and that more fish have been lost by over haste than by any lack of skill or inadequacy of fishing-gear.

And Stuart preached patience to himself, till he was sick of the very thought of the wearisome virtue.

He was worried and ill at ease, too, at the entire cessation of news from New York. A letter from the doctor had reached him a few days after the intercepted letter to Mr. Brownlow, confirming the news of the wonderful rally the old man had made, and saying that he hoped the patient would be well enough to go back with Guest, of whom he wrote as if Sinclair

would know all about him, adding that he was a capital fellow, and that it was uncommonly lucky he had turned up when he did, as his company had done the old gentleman no end of good.

And then there was nothing further, and he could only conclude that Mr. Brownlow had gone away with this Guest up to some farm in the country without sending any answer to that carefully composed letter of his, which he calculated had by this time had ample time to reach its destination and allow of an answer being returned. He was desperately in want of money, too, and his journey to London had been principally to see if any further remittance had been sent for him to the bank from which he had drawn his supplies on arriving.

But no instructions had been received, and the journey had made such a hole in his remaining cash, that even those few days in London brought him face to face with some of the old shifts and struggles which seemed more intolerable than ever now that he had known the comfort and peace of life without them.

He came back to Lowburn resolved to settle matters with Kit with as little delay as possible, and then had come this detestable waiting game, which seemed to make no progress as the days went on.

So Sinclair's musings under the mulberry tree or down on the shore at Lowburn Bay were fraught with anxious debate and weighing of probabilities, and it was difficult to keep the pleasant, cheerful equanimity which made him so agreeable a companion, and to suppress the irritability that was sometimes aroused

by the children, and to be always ready with the small attentions which he reckoned would not fail to tell in the long run with Kit.

It is curious how true the perceptions of young children and animals often are, and it was little Jack and Bogey who first took what the others, except perhaps Kit, considered a foolish and unreasonable dislike to Sinclair. With Jack it was certainly intuitive, for Sinclair did his utmost to secure the favour of one who was so specially near Kit's heart.

But with Bogey I rather suspect that an irritable kick during a *tête-à-tête* between him and Sinclair may have been remembered by an unforgiving little heart under Bogey's rough coat, and caused ugly wrinklings of his black nose, and a want of friendly movement about his stump of a tail, and a rumbling little growl in the throat when Sinclair came into the room.

"It's so very unlike Bogey," the children all declared, and Nellie and Christy talked very seriously to him about his conduct, and made him walk all across the room on his hind legs to beg Stuart's pardon, and to say he would never be such a cross little dog again.

And Bogey looked out of the corners of his eyes and appeared extremely penitent, and half an hour afterwards repeated the performance of growling at Sinclair, with the addition of showing his teeth in a manner shocking to behold.

"It's so unlike Jack," Kit said to Nurse. For Jack's aversion was, of course, not such an open subject, nor displayed by wrinklings of nose or showing of teeth.

“Oh, I know,” Nurse said, with that look of superior wisdom that was so exasperating, and made the beholder long to convict its possessor of foolishness — “I know well enough what’s the matter with Master Jack. And I can tell him he’ll have to get used to it. He’s jealous, that’s what’s the matter with him.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Kit said, drawing up her little head with what Nurse called “her fine-madam air,” only spoilt on this occasion by the colour that would rush into those treacherous cheeks of hers, all the deeper because of the irritatingly knowing eye that plainly observed her confusion. “Why should he be jealous?”

“No,” said Nurse, rather indistinct from pins in the mouth, being occupied with cutting out, an occupation which gives scope for long and exasperating pauses, when the speaker is, or feigns to be, at some critical juncture and assumes a sudden absorption in the business in hand, attended by a break in her conversation most tantalizing to the listener — “no, there ain’t no call to be jealous, and it’s only what he did ought to expect; but I always told you, Miss Kit, as you spoilt that boy, and it’s only natural as he should feel it a bit when he don’t come first with you any longer.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” stammered Kit.

But Nurse’s sharp little look of intelligence, as she raised her eyes from that intricate shaping of gore or gusset, was seriously at fault, for she (Kit) was not thinking any longer of Stuart Sinclair, but of a name

that Jack had put next her own in his prayers, and had asked, "Where did you put him, Kit?"

And she was remorsefully asking herself whether it was true that Jack did not come first with her any longer.

"There, Miss Kit, you're putting in that sleeve upside down! I wish you'd mind what you are about."

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE BEACON.

"The dawn is overcast, the morning lowers,
And heavily in clouds brings in the day."

ADDISON.

IN Stuart Sinclair's close scrutiny of the letters that arrived in those days at the Vicarage, it had not escaped his notice that there were sundry blue envelopes addressed to the Vicar in a legal hand, and bearing the London postmark, which arrived very frequently, and that their arrival was invariably succeeded by a troubled look on the kind old face, and much pacing up and down the filbert walk at the end of the garden, which, since Tibby's lessons had invaded the seclusion of the study, had been tacitly made over to the Vicar as a place of retirement, on which none of the children were to intrude on any pretext whatever. Christy and Jack, on some urgent business about rabbits, had been known to wait patiently for half an hour — watching as if there might have been bolts and bars to prevent them disturbing the privacy of the old bowed figure pacing up and down the mossy path in the shade of the filberts; and a squirrel, who likewise greatly affected the place, especially when the nuts were ripe, watched too, with

its bright impudent eyes, and sometimes risked a scamper past, reckoning on being safe from molestation.

Kit would now and then, being a privileged person, and allowed to break rules binding on the rest of the family, join her father there, and, slipping a little hand through his arm, pace up and down with him — sometimes in silence and always in sympathy, though she might not know a bit the anxiety or worry that was weighing on him, and was unconscious of being any help or comfort, or indeed, if there was anything to help or comfort about, or sometimes, even if he were aware of her presence, and were not just mechanically suiting his steps to hers.

When the first of these letters came under Sinclair's notice, it had cost him a *mauvais quart d'heure* — as who was to say that a communication from New York might not arrive under cover from some London lawyer, and, over the edge of the newspaper, he scanned the Vicar's face anxiously as he opened it; and was reassured by seeing no expression of surprise or perplexity, but only of trouble and weariness, as of some old vexatious worry. He saw, too, that it was some trouble not shared by Kit, as the Vicar folded the letter and put it into his pocket, instead of tossing it across to her or letting her read it over his shoulder, as he generally did with his correspondence. And this, and subsequent letters were evidently, as I have said before, the cause of much anxious thought and prolonged paces up and down under the filberts.

"Money!" Stuart said to himself, as he noticed the lines deepening and hardening round mouth and

eyes as only the sharp tool of that great engraver Mammon can bring them out on the human face. "Poor, old chap! I know what it is well enough!"

And then, to stifle the remembrance of those notes which might, perhaps, have gone a good way towards clearing off those lines and furrows, and might have put an end to the blue letters that visibly accentuated them, he thought of all the advantages that the old man would gain from a well-to-do and generous son-in-law, and what a happy, prosperous old age lay before him, troubled by no cares for the future of his children, which would be safe in that son-in-law's keeping.

He felt already a benefactor to the old man, with all his generous intentions for the future, and even a little irritated that Mr. Brownlow should make such a worry over what could only be a temporary and trifling matter, though how the Vicar was to know that, it would have been difficult to say.

Still it was not altogether amiss that Mr. Brownlow should feel a little pinch over money matters, as it would make him more inclined to listen to Stuart's overtures about Kit, though he had no doubt of these being well received, as the Vicar had evidently all along been well inclined towards him.

It was Kit — Kit herself, who was the difficulty, for he felt sure if Kit set her heart on anything, that thing would certainly come about if Mr. Brownlow could compass it for his darling.

It was the most aggravating position for a man of Sinclair's temperament — with all the circumstances

favourable, no opposing influence to overcome, no prejudice to contend with, no worldly wisdom or suspicious investigation into his past life to fear, and with Kit herself not unfavourable or actively discouraging, and yet there was a sort of intangible barrier between them that seemed impossible to break down.

When he was not with her, the difficulty seemed absurd and a mere fancy, incomprehensible in a nature that had never been over diffident or distrustful, and which he set down impatiently to his illness, and the weak state of his nerves.

Every morning he came down with the firm intention of bringing things to a point. More than once he followed her out into the garden, or drew her away from the others in their wanderings through the fields, or down on the beach, and then —— Why, the most finished coquette could not have kept a man off with more consummate skill than did this little unsophisticated country girl. It required an overwhelming, irrepressible love like Rob's — which was just what Sinclair had not got among his many well-tempered weapons — to break down the guard which Nature, not art, had taught her to use to ward off the declaration of love which she did not wish to hear. Rob, sitting in that ungainly attitude on the shingle, with his knees drawn up to his chin, and his back turned to her, had blundered through Kit's guard, and touched the heart that Sinclair's gallant and practised swordsmanship could not reach.

But, perhaps, that very attitude helped Rob, as

Sinclair found that Kit's eyes, suddenly looking straight and full at him, made the words — ever so much prettier and more poetical than Rob's — falter and wither on his lips, as if she brought some test to bear on the gold he would offer her, and proved it worthless dross.

The time when he seemed to draw nearest to her, to be admitted beyond that invisible but very perceptible barrier, was when they talked of her father.

She would let herself go then a little, and would speak straight out of the heart, that was so full of love for her father, that it must needs overflow to any one who was good to him. You may be sure that the trouble in the old man's face, was not lost on one who studied it like a sacred book; nor were those letters unnoticed — the contents of which were not shared with her as all the rest of his correspondence was, though she would not, by look or sign, show that she felt this exceptional want of confidence in her.

"He will tell me if he wants me to know," she said to herself; and when one of those letters fell into her hands when she was brushing his coat, she put it carefully into his drawer without a glance at it, though, as a rule, she would have read any letters of his she had happened upon, to remind him of engagements otherwise forgotten, or questions left unanswered.

But all the same — or, perhaps, all the more — Kit felt uneasy and oppressed; and there being no one to whom she could confide her anxiety — "for Nellie was not old enough to understand," thought

this wise young head of only three years longer experience, and Nurse, from hints and innuendoes, such as those quoted in the last chapter, not being an acceptable *confidante* just at present, and Rob being away, she responded gratefully when Sinclair opened the subject.

It was one afternoon in August, and they had gone up to a high part of the downs called the Beacon. Sinclair was better than when he first returned from London, but still kept up a certain amount of invalid ways, which ensured him that gentle consideration from Kit which he had hoped might lead by degrees to something warmer.

This was the longest expedition he had made since his return, and he and Kit had taken it very leisurely, following the zigzag green path up the hill, and resting frequently wherever a twisted thorn tree — where the haws were turning ruddy — or a great ragged gorse bush gave a patch of shade.

The rest of the party made short cuts — which took very much longer — up steep bits, where the short grass was slippery, and frequently led to a roll, stopped by a very prickly gorse bush — very afflicting to whatever part of the body first came in contact with it. Or they would play at follow-my-leader; and, when the leader was Tibby, he took them through every impossible thicket of thorn or bramble or bracken, down precipitous little hollows, where gravel had been dug out, or even across a small pond in a dip in the downs, safely out of sight of Kit.

It was a beautiful day, with that first touch of

autumn that comes suddenly, when the summer's revels seem hardly more than at their height, to bid us look forward, and, while it seems to add a fresh loveliness, to whisper of falling leaves and shortening days, winter and death.

But there was no one up at the Beacon that afternoon to moralize, as you and I might have done, on the freshness in the air unknown to midsummer, or on a bracken leaf turned golden here and there, or on the hips and haws ripening to red, or on the luxuriant tangle of the clematis turning from the traveller's joy of summer to autumn's old man's beard.

The heather was all splendid in imperial purple, to which Solomon in all his glory could not compare ; and the golden gorse completed the royal magnificence, with foxglove sceptres standing up in stately height.

From the Beacon was to be seen a wide extent of the downs in this gorgeous array, downright dazzling under the full August sunshine ; but here and there the downs, as if impatient of such frippery, pushed up a great, bare, strong shoulder of dull green grass or grey rugged stone, like a giant casting off the garlands that a child might have twined about him, or like Samson breaking Delilah's deceitful seven green withes.

Away on one side the downs stretch till trees and hedgerows, barns and ricks, farmhouses and thatched roofs tell of cultivation and human habitation ; and the white road winds like a ribbon, dwindling to a

thread and disappears where some smoke in the distance may represent Seadown. On the other hand is the great, wide, blue sea, coming wonderfully high up to meet the great, wide, blue sky, with a white sail that looks as if it must be flying in mid-air, so high is the horizon near which it sails, as seen from this exalted point of view.

I have said that this was to be seen from the Beacon; but Stuart Sinclair, after the final climb, was more inclined to lie flat on the soft fine grass mixed with the tiny thyme-flowers and eyebright, under the one stunted and twisted thorn tree that had weathered the wild winter storms up there, and kept a certain amount of life in its stubborn old heart, in spite of its untoward circumstances. There was not much shadow to be found from it, but Kit and Stuart had each a big bracken by way of a sunshade, reminding Kit of that day in the hayfield that seemed now so very long ago — when it was Rob who lay at her feet, and she told him about Stuart Sinclair's expected visit.

The children had scattered on one quest and another — gathering wood for the invariable fire for tea, mushrooms from the heights, blackberries supposed to be ripe and pressed upon Kit, who, however, took warning from Jack's ingenuous countenance, which was drawn up with an unmistakeable contortion of extreme sourness.

But, for the most part, Kit and Stuart were left alone, and surely no man could have had a better opportunity for speaking what was in his heart. But

perhaps it was just this that made it difficult for Stuart — that it was not from his heart that he had to speak, but only from the head.

But when he began to speak about Mr. Brownlow, he told himself, with satisfaction, that he had at last found the weak place in that stubborn little fortress to which he had been laying siege, for what seemed to him, such a wearisome time. Kit's manner perceptibly softened, and she drew a little nearer to him; and when he stretched out his hand and touched her arm to emphasize something he said, she did not draw away as she had done of late, when, by chance or intention, his hand had touched hers.

"I am afraid the Vicar has some worrying business," he began; and Kit's eyes came back at once to his face, having for some minutes been fixed on that ridiculously high-up sail, with a dreamy, far-away look, that was rather exasperating to a man like Stuart, who was not used to being ignored, and especially by a school-girl like this.

But after that beginning he had no further reason to complain of Kit's inattention; and as she bent towards him with her sweet, earnest eyes, and tender, little mouth, he could almost have imagined that the loving concern was for him as well as for the subject of their conversation.

"I'm afraid he has," she said. "There are some letters he gets, now and then, that I know bother him. I dare say you have not noticed, but he has had several lately. He generally shows his letters to me — not that I can be of any help, but I think

people find a comfort in just speaking out their troubles to some one. I'm sure I do. But he has not shown these to me, and I dare say it is something he does not care for me to know about; and, of course, it's only for his own sake that I wish he would, for he has said, sometimes, that it's a relief to talk a thing out instead of brooding over it, as I am sure he is doing now."

"I was afraid he had some worry. Have you any idea what it can be?"

"No; but I was wondering if it could possibly be anything to do with Uncle Philip?"

"Ah?" said Stuart; and with all his care he could not keep out of the short ejaculation a tone of something beyond sympathetic interest which struck her ear.

"Oh, I forgot," she said, "you know Uncle Philip. But, of course, you don't know that in old days he was rather unfortunate, and father had to help him a good deal. Do you think it at all likely that he might be wanting help again?"

"Hardly," said Stuart, with a quick mental vision of the comforts and luxuries that surrounded the old man's sick-room, by the side of which Lowburn Vicarage might have been reckoned plain and bare.

"You think he is fairly prosperous then?"

"Fairly," Stuart answered. He was lighting a cigarette, which is a good excuse for a short answer when convenient.

"I am so glad to hear you say so. It was very silly of me; but I was conjuring up all sorts of

troubles and money difficulties brought on us by poor old Uncle Philip. I wish I had asked you before, but I forgot that you knew him."

"I wish you would ask me anything I could help you about. It would be my greatest happiness."

The frankness of her eyes clouded for a moment at the words, and the tone in which they were spoken. But she was too full of her father, and the mysterious trouble weighing upon him, to pay much attention to what, at another time, might have silenced and annoyed her.

"I wish you could get father to talk to you, and tell you what it is. You know so much more of the world and business than I do, of course, and I expect, than father does. He was saying, only the other day, what confidence he had in your opinion about business matters."

"I am so glad to have your father's good opinion." There was a little stress on *your* which pricked her, and made her wince; but when a horse is going at full speed, it does not feel the sting of a fly, and Kit was eager to arrive at this means of lifting the cloud from the dear old face, and the depression from his mind.

"Is it money matters, Miss Kit?"

She shook her head despondently. "I know there used to be in the old days, but I thought that was all gone by."

The children were coming up the hill, and their *tête-à-tête* would soon be interrupted.

"Don't look so desperately sad," he said, draw-

ing nearer to her, and laying a lightly caressing hand on her arm. "I will get him to open up to me; and I am sure, between us, we can find some way out of the difficulty, whatever it may be. Only you mustn't look so sad."

"I would give anything," she said, "to save him anxiety."

"Would you, Kit?" came the quick, low answer. "Would you give *anything*? I shall remember that another day."

And the girl caught away her arm from the light touch that suddenly seemed to have become a heavy weight like a fetter, and flushed crimson under the meaning look in the eyes that a minute before had met hers in such kindly sympathy. And she wished her tongue had been cut out before it had said those silly, meaningless words.

And Sinclair saw the recoil and the look almost of aversion that came into the gentle, earnest eyes, and, angry as it made him, he smiled grimly to himself.

"Nevertheless, my young lady, I have found the way to deal with you is through Mr. Brownlow, and I think it's pretty straight sailing now."

CHAPTER XXI.

PERPLEXITY.

“Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden.” —ECCLES. xii. 5.

KIT was right in her surmise that the trouble connected with those blue letters which clouded Mr. Brownlow's face, and caused such long paces up and down in the filbert walk, had to do with her Uncle Philip. But it was no trouble of recent times, as she also concluded, but one that dated back to those distant days when she was a little curly-headed child, and Philip Brownlow carried her on his shoulder. Both the brothers had been unbusiness-like and unknowing in the ways of the world, and on a sudden emergency some money had been obtained, for the repayment of which the two brothers had made themselves jointly responsible to an old friend of Philip Brownlow's.

This transaction the Vicar had entirely forgotten till quite recently, when he received a notification from the executors of the lender that, in consequence of the death of the testator, the principal, with considerable arrears of interest, amounting to a total of £250, was required, and must be paid at once.

“And forasmuch as he had not to pay” were the words that buzzed in the old man’s head continually — words that he woke up to in those early morning hours, when vitality runs low, and the courage of the bravest seems to fail, and faith itself grows weak ; for was it not in the fourth watch of the night that the great apostle saw the wind boisterous, and was afraid, as he went to his Master on the deep, and at the cock-crowing that he shrank at the word of a woman, and denied his Lord ?

“I won’t trouble Kit about it,” he always told himself, though he was yearning for the sympathy he would be sure to meet with.

But what should a child like that know about money matters ? and why should her youth be clouded by such trouble if it would do no good ?

He was sorely tempted, sometimes, when she would come and slip her hand under his arm, and pace up and down by his side along the filbert walk, or when she came into his study in the evening on some patently barefaced excuse, and would stand by the side of his writing-table, lingering with shy little looks that were almost irresistible to unlock the tongue that had never been restrained with her before.

That evening, when Kit came back from the Beacon, he was almost betrayed into breaking his resolution, for he had been writing a letter to the solicitors to implore a little time for the payment of the money. The tea that Nurse had brought to him in the study lay untouched by his side ; and

when he had finished his letter and posted it ("Lor', now; how the passon do be breaking, for sure!" the people said as he passed), he came back and sat at his table, leaning his head on his hands in utter prostration of mind and body.

And here Kit found him, looking a very forlorn old figure, with his grey head bent on his hands; and the futile little attempt at briskness and cheerfulness with which he received her did not deceive her in the least.

"You have had no tea, and you have been worrying yourself to death," she said severely. "This is the last time I shall go out and leave you. I told Nurse to see after you."

"So she did, my dear — so she did. She brought me some very nice tea and delic ——"

But Kit's accusing finger pointing to the cup full to the brim, and the untouched bread and butter, convicted this unconscious old story-teller, and covered him with confusion.

"No, more I did," in answer to the unspoken accusation. "I must have forgotten all about it. I was busy, you know, my dear. Well, never mind; I shall have a better appetite for my supper."

But Kit was not to be so lightly appeased, and the tray was taken away in grim silence, and presently came back with fresh-made tea and daintily prepared toast, and the arm-chair was wheeled round into the window, where the dusk was beginning to soften the light; and Mr. Brownlow must sit there, with Kit on the arm of the chair, holding the cup and plate, which



had to be honestly emptied of every drop and crumb before she would condescend to tell him what they had been doing, and how they had enjoyed themselves at the Beacon.

Somehow, with Kit perched on the arm of his chair, the future did not look so impenetrably black. There must be some way out of the difficulty, though it seemed as insuperable as that "iron gate that leadeth into the city" of Jerusalem did to St. Peter, which nevertheless "opened to them of his own accord" to set him free.

He was very near telling her then ; and when, after supper, Stuart Sinclair came and enticed him out under the mulberry tree, it did not need much art to win the old man's confidence. It was not a very large amount, £250, but it was as impossible for the Vicar to pay as if it had been £2000.

"You see, Sinclair," he said, "I had hardly thought of it from that day when I signed the paper till the morning the letter came from the lawyer. I blame myself very much ; for, of course, the accumulation of interest has largely increased the amount, and, for my children's sake, I ought not to have let it run on. And, then, it is not honest. I have so often preached to my people about the dishonesty of being in debt, and all the time while I have preached to others I myself have been a castaway. Poor Philip ! I'm afraid I have been sometimes a little hard on him in my mind."

Up in Sinclair's portmanteau there was that empty pocket-book, the thought of which came back with a

worrying persistence to Sinclair's mind. It was of Russia leather, and the scent of it had somehow got about his clothes, and almost sickened him with its subtle reminder of an unpleasant incident.

While the Vicar talked, it seemed to Sinclair that the smell of Russia leather mingled with and almost drowned the odour of his cigarette and the honey-sweet fragrance of the tobacco plants in the border close by.

Those notes would have cleared the trouble at once from the old man's mind and from Kit's sweet eyes, where every cloud on her father's face was faithfully reflected. Well, what is done is done, and cannot be helped, and perhaps if he, Sinclair, could help the Vicar out of this difficulty, it would furnish him with a powerful weapon against Kit; so that it might, after all, have been quite as well that those notes should never have reached the Vicar's hand, and prevented this difficulty from arising, from which Sinclair hoped to rescue him, and thus place him under boundless obligations.

But the question was — how was he to be rescued? Sinclair's wits were desperately hard at work that night as he sat by the old man under the mulberry tree, and listened, with a few sympathetic remarks or intelligent questions, to the confidences that poured out without restraint now that the ice had once been broken.

“Have you written to your brother?”

“No — poor fellow! — I don't suppose it would be much good. Of course the money was for him; but, no doubt, he has forgotten it as completely as I

did ; and as he seems to be doing better, I should not like to discourage him by springing this mine on him. If I can possibly arrange this business without applying to him, I must do so. And, as I told you the other day, I have no relations and singularly few friends, so a sudden call of this kind is more difficult to me than it might be to many men. And then — there are the children —— ”

The old man's voice shook, and he had to cough a good deal, and get up and straighten some books on a shelf of the book-case — books that certainly looked tidier before he attended to them.

And in spite of Sinclair's consciousness that he had it in his power by a few words to take away the heart-breaking anxiety from the old man, and withheld those few words, he felt quite sorry for him ; such odd, superficial moods and feelings sweep across the human mind, fastidious tenderness masking sometimes heartless cruelty, or open-handed liberality depths of greed and covetousness.

“ Will you let me help you ? ” he said.

“ If you will help me with your advice, I shall be most grateful. You see, I never have been much of a business man ; even managing the clubs and the parish accounts has always been rather a trouble to me, though, thank God, I have always kept them right. I will show you Mr. Scott's letters.”

And he brought out the blue letters, whose advent both Stuart and Kit had taken such note of from such very different motives. They were limp, and the envelopes worn from constant perusal, though the

matter of them was so plain that no further meaning could be extracted by the closest scrutiny or the keenest intellect ; but all the same the Vicar watched Sinclair's face as he read them through with an eager expectancy, as if he might get an altogether different significance out of them.

" Will you let me arrange this for you ? " Sinclair had not quite evolved how it was to be done, but he spoke as quietly and decidedly as if he had only to draw a cheque or put his hand in his pocket to settle such a trifling matter.

But the old man shook his head. " It is like you, Sinclair, to propose such a thing, and I fully appreciate your kindness, but, of course, I could not think of allowing it. When I told you about my troubles, it was not at all with the intention of sponging upon you, or asking for anything but your advice, as being a better man of business than myself. Thank you most warmly all the same."

And he held out his hand to give Sinclair's a cordial clasp.

" Why shouldn't I arrange this for you ? "

" Why should you ? I and mine have no manner of claim on you. Our friendship — for I'm sure it may be called so — is nevertheless of very recent date ; and when you go away — though we should be glad to think you would remember us sometimes — we should have no right to be hurt if you forgot all about the old Vicar and his children."

" Forget ? " Sinclair said. " That's not likely. Why should I help you ? Because I shall have some-

thing to ask you another day, and perhaps not such a distant one. And perhaps you won't be able to say then that you and yours have no claim on me."

"Eh?" said the old man, with a strange, puzzled look at Stuart's face. "Eh?" again, as light began slowly to penetrate within his mind, revealing suddenly meanings and explanations of trifling circumstances, and recalling words and looks and hints from the village folks, which had fallen pointless hitherto, on one who thought of Kit still as a little girl, sweet and dear beyond all other little girls, but not having reached the time for others to find out the sweetness and dearness — the time for wooing and wedding.

He hardly listened to what Sinclair went on to say in such quick, earnest tones, so full was he of the sudden revelation of his little Kit as a grown-up girl, with a lover already seeking her favour; but when he came back to attention, Sinclair was saying —

"I don't think I am altogether displeasing to Miss Kit, and if I may count on your good offices, I am sure that will be greatly in my favour. So you will let me assume now the position I hope some day to occupy, as if I were Tibby's elder brother."

There was a genial, free, hearty effect in Stuart's words and manner. What a good-looking fellow he was, too! the Vicar noticed; quite such as to take any girl's fancy. And yet the Vicar stretched out his hand involuntarily to take back the letters which Sinclair was folding together and preparing to put in his pocket.

There was a certain undefined feeling, not founded

on anything either in Sinclair's words or manner, that a bargain was being struck ; that Kit was to be the price paid for the relief from this load of debt and anxiety which had been weighing him down to the ground. But if it were a hundred times more heavy and crushing, it must be borne rather than that Kit's happiness should be endangered.

"This is quite a surprise to me," he said ; "I never dreamt of it."

"I hope not an entirely unpleasant surprise?"

"Not at all ; you know I have always liked you. But it wants thinking over ; and, of course, I need not say it is entirely as Kit likes. I would not influence her in the slightest degree."

"Certainly not. I should be the last to wish any pressure brought to bear, but I flatter myself it will not be necessary. Anyhow, you will let me tackle Mr. Scott, and in return I shall count on your good offices."

"Of course, of course !" said the old man hesitatingly ; "but ——"

But Sinclair had gone with the blue letter in his pocket, and the relief was not so overwhelming as the Vicar would have imagined an hour ago, for there was an undefined, unreasonable feeling in his heart that he had sold his little girl, the apple of his eye, his little Kit.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"A goodly apple, rotten at the heart,
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath."

SHAKESPEARE.

"HULLO, Sinclair! you are an early visitor. Hawkins, bring another cup and plate, and tell cook to send up some more coffee."

The doctor was sitting over his breakfast when Sinclair was shown in next morning, and at the Lowburn breakfast-table great surprise was expressed by all, except the Vicar, at Sinclair's place being empty, and at Nurse's report that she had given him a cup of milk and some bread-and-butter soon after six that morning, before he started.

"He was going to start off without a bite of anything," Nurse said, with a slightly reproachful air, to Kit, as if she ought to have known and prevented such an unwise proceeding. "I tell him it was sheer, stark, raving madness, to walk all that way on an empty stomach, and he not half strong yet, nor, I should think, ever would be; and his wife, whoever she may be, will have her hands full to see after him, as men is a deal worse than children to manage, and them as ain't strong is the worst of the lot."

Sinclair got a scolding at the other end of his walk too, for Dr. Chambers read him a lecture on over-exertion; and certainly he did not look very well, having slept but little through the night, and tossed about in anxious and feverish thought.

"All the same, I'm very glad to see you. Couldn't you send for your traps and stop a bit, and keep a forlorn father company, now he has been so cruelly deserted by his offspring? I can't say that Rob was very first-rate company, but I miss his society more than you'd think for. I'm getting back into old bachelor habits—read while I'm eating my dinner, and put off meal-times when I'm busy. I shall ruin my digestion unless I get some one to keep me in order a bit. It's most demoralizing living alone."

"Have you heard from Rob?"

"No, except a couple of lines to say he had arrived. He's not a great letter-writer, as you may imagine, and when he was at school we made a compact on both sides that no news was good news, and I suppose the same is in grace now, and that I may take it that I shall hear soon enough if anything is the matter."

But Rob was an uninteresting subject, and Dr. Chambers turned readily away from it to one much nearer his heart, though the way he opened the matter brought, for the moment, consternation to the heart of his hearer.

"I have been hoping you would come over, for I have been wanting to consult you upon a matter of business. The fact is, I want to borrow some money."

Sinclair's face was well under control, but he could not prevent a slight drop of the jaw at this announcement, seeing that it was exactly for the same object that he had come over to see Dr. Chambers that morning.

The doctor noticed the change of expression, and went on rather testily —

“Oh, I dare say you are surprised. I believe every one thinks I am rolling in riches, coining money out of my profession. But I tell you it's not to be done in these days of specialists, and people running up to London to consult them if they have a pain in their little fingers. And I have been unlucky, too, in some of my investments. But what's worrying me now is about that book of mine. I told you something about it one night, if I remember right. It is a thing, though I say it, that, if it's properly brought out, will make its mark. It fills a place in medical science where a want has been felt for a long time, and will be a handbook in time to come, if I'm not much mistaken. I have given a lot of time and research to the subject and brought it up satisfactorily to a certain point. And now I'm in correspondence with a man at Leipzig who has been working on much the same lines as I have, and who is willing to collaborate with me in the matter. He has more opportunity than I have for bringing the whole thing up to date, but he has rather a more ambitious idea than I had to start with, of how the book is to be brought out. No doubt he is right. It's no use sinking the ship for a haphorth of tar, but

there are a good many expenses involved — photographs and illustrations which must be done in the very best way possible, and the careful verification of facts which require laborious research by competent people. You might as well throw the book into the fire unless you have every detail and point proved beyond all power of contradiction. And, of course, all this means money. There's no doubt it's more than worth every halfpenny we spend on it. It's bound to be a success, in a money point of view, as well as in every other, only the question is, where's the money to come from? It won't do to let the grass grow under our feet, for there's no knowing if some one else may not step in before us, and just spoil the whole affair. I have heard that there's a man at Edinburgh who is working in the same direction, and if I don't nail my man at Leipzig, he may be got hold of by some one else, and he has learnt too much of the lie of the land by this time to be trusted in the enemy's camp."

Sinclair was a good listener, but his patience was sorely taxed, and his expressions of interest and concern were so perfunctory, that any one less taken up with his own concerns might have guessed that his thoughts were otherwise occupied, and he was sorely tempted more than once to cut the doctor's prosing short, and to go off and try to find some other means of getting those £250 which, in the restless tossings of the night, had grown to appear the price he had to pay for a rich wife and a future of ease and affluence.

But his patience was rewarded, and his attention brought back more closely to the doctor's words by hearing him say —

“It is not so much the immediate payment that is wanted, but to guarantee the repayment of such sums as Herr Müller may deem it necessary to expend. It's quite possible we are over-estimating the expense, but what I want is to write to Müller, and tell him to push the matter forward with all speed, and guarantee the expenses when the book is ready for publication.”

“If you really don't want it at once,” Sinclair said, “I think I might put you in the way of it. But, as a matter of fact, I myself am in a bit of a corner just now — merely temporarily — but owing to remittances not having been forwarded as I directed. Of course I have been staying longer here than I intended, which accounts for the hitch, but I came over this morning to see if you could make it convenient to lend me a hundred or two till I get the supplies. If you really could oblige me, I shall be delighted in return to guarantee what you want later on. A couple of thousands — is that about the sum? We can settle the terms of interest by-and-by.”

There was a moment's pause. Dr. Chambers was closely examining one of his filbert-shaped, well-cared-for nails after a quick, little look at Sinclair's face, which expressed more eagerness than was quite accounted for by his words. A temporary inconvenience as regards money must surely be a trifling matter to Sinclair. But Dr. Chambers had got it so firmly into his mind that Sinclair was a prosperous

man who had made a good thing of it in California, that he was more puzzled than rendered distrustful by this proposal, and Sinclair broke the momentary silence by one of those pleasant open-hearted laughs of his.

"Oh, I see I shall have to make a clean breast of it, and that is just what I came to do. The old Vicar over there is in a bit of a money trouble — not a great matter, but you would think it was the national debt, at least, to hear him talk of it — and he's making himself quite ill over the business. What I want is just to set it straight for him, and I could do it directly, only this confounded hitch over the remittances makes it a bit awkward."

"I see," said the doctor — "I see."

And again Sinclair laughed. "Oh, of course you see that there's more behind. Well, perhaps it's not unconnected with little Miss Kit. I'm not the only man who has made a fool of himself for the sake of a pair of blue eyes — eh, doctor?"

The doctor's personal experience did not certainly afford an illustration of this proposition, but he nodded in recognition of the general application.

"I'm making pretty good running, and I want to clinch matters before I go off. I've wasted more time than I can afford over the job, but when I've once set my heart on a thing, I'm not the sort of fellow to give in; and if you can help me, I think I can pull it off in the next day or two. Look here, Dr. Chambers, if you can draw me a cheque for £250 to-day, I will pay it back with an extra 'o' added the day I marry Kit Brownlow."

"Upon my word!" the doctor said.

I think this proposal had almost penetrated the polished exterior, and reached the real little man within, so unfeigned was the surprise of look and word with which he turned to Stuart Sinclair with wide-open eyes and dropped jaw. If only he had said "Lor'!" as Polly the kitchen-maid did when she was "struck all of a heap" by some astonishment, I think the inflated exterior might have collapsed for good and all.

But Stuart was too much occupied with his own concerns to notice the unusual naturalness of the doctor's manner, and Dr. Chambers was soon himself again, or rather the man known to the outside world as himself.

"I had no idea," he said, "it was such a serious matter. Miss Kit is a nice little girl, but you know, of course, that she is penniless."

Sinclair shrugged his shoulders, and got up and began to pace up and down the room to avoid the doctor's eye, which was scanning him curiously. Dr. Chambers was accustomed closely to observe his patients to detect signs and symptoms to help him to diagnose their cases, and in this patient there should have been very marked symptoms of that violent, overmastering fever of love, which seemed the only possible reason for his wish to marry the penniless daughter of a poor country parson. But the symptoms were not satisfactorily marked, and Dr. Chambers suspected "complications," but what these might be he was entirely unable to discover, though the

conversation was prolonged for some time, and though Sinclair was apparently talking with the greatest candour and openness. If it had been any one else — if it had been Rob, now — Dr. Chambers could have understood Kit Brownlow's pretty face moving him to any act of folly, but in a man of the world like Sinclair, who had seen life, and was no longer a sentimental boy, it seemed an odd development, and the thought puzzled him, and came back to his mind again and again during the day, interfering considerably with the attention his patients demanded, whose symptoms were not so interesting to him as those of the young fellow who was making his way back to Lowburn with a look of assured triumph in his face, and a cheque for £250 in his pocket.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PRICE.

“Oh, it is excellent
To have a giant’s strength; but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.”

SHAKESPEARE.

THAT feeling of having sold Kit did not make Mr. Brownlow’s face any brighter or more free from care the next day, and he looked so depressed and out of sorts that Kit persuaded him to give Tibby a holiday, and let the children go off to the shore, with their dinner in a basket under Nellie’s leadership, so that she and her father might have a quiet day alone together, sitting under the mulberry tree, where he dozed or watched her as she read aloud to him, or sat at her needlework, with a strange compunction and tenderness in his eyes, which the girl could in no way understand.

Perhaps, after ‘all, it would have been kinder to have gone away with the others, and have left him to brood over his thoughts alone, for every tender little care she showed him, each fond little smile with which she met his look, every gentle touch and loving word, seemed to reproach him afresh for what was beginning to seem his treachery towards her.

And yet every now and then he would try and pull himself together, and reason against this morbid feeling. Stuart Sinclair was a thoroughly nice fellow — yes, thoroughly nice, he would internally reiterate, to silence the voice that only since last night had begun to criticise the prospective son-in-law; good-looking, gentlemanly, honourable, generous — just such a man as a girl would like. And Kit did like him, he felt sure that Kit and all of them, except perhaps that queer, little Jack, who had taken a whimsical dislike to him; but then, children are so capricious! Of course, he himself would never think any one good enough for Kit, but that was the way of fond fathers all the world over. And, in a worldly point of view, it was what any one would call an uncommonly good match for a girl without a penny, and it seemed Providential (and Providence was not a mere figure of speech with the Vicar, as it is with most of us, but very certainly to be spelt with a capital P) that such a man should have happened upon their secluded country home, and found out his little Kit, “a maid whom there were few to see and very few to love.”

It was Providential, too, surely it was Providential, that he should come at this juncture to give such willing and generous help, and of course there was no bargain in the matter, and the Vicar's good offices in the subject of the wooing of Kit would have been freely and cordially given, even if there had been no call for help in the pecuniary difficulty.

And then, having convinced his head quite conclusively that it was altogether a matter of congratu-

lation, his irrational old heart felt fit to burst with compunction, and filled his eyes with such mists of tender pity and distress as in no wise bore out the reasonable conclusions of his head.

"And forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold" — that would not signify if he could just bear it all himself — "and his wife" — thank God, she was out of reach of miserable, sordid money troubles — "nought to that place approaches, their sweet peace to molest;" — "and his children" — yes, that was where it came so hard — "and his children," even little Kit.

"What is it, daddy?" Kit's soft voice said, with sympathetic tears shining in the blue eyes, meeting the dim anguish in his.

Daddy was a name only used on very special occasions, when father and daughter were drawn very close together by some strong emotion. It was a name that had lingered on from very early days when Kit was the only child, or at any rate the only articulate one, and it had been dropped by mutual consent when other small tongues might have taken it up. "He is only my daddy," small Kit used to say severely to baby Nellie; "he's is your fader."

"What is it, daddy?"

There was no resisting that name, and when she came and knelt down on the grass beside him and drew his arm round his neck, he told her about the debt.

Why had he not told her before? The relief was immediate. It did not seem so overwhelming and

insurmountable. She actually laughed and made light of it in the first relief of knowing that this terrible looming trouble was no worse. You see, it was her first experience of money troubles, so she did not realize, as some of us may have done, that there are no worse troubles than those connected with money, or, at any rate, none more wearing and harassing. It must be paid, oh yes, of course it must be paid. But if time was allowed, they would save and scrape and screw, and soon get it paid off. There were a hundred ways they might economize, and they were all young and strong, and all of them, even little Jack, would help, and why shouldn't they take boarders? or Indian children? or—— The young brain was full of plans and suggestions, and the small face, so near the Vicar's, was bright and eager, and he put a hand on either side of it and turned it up to kiss the earnest, little mouth, and push the rings of bright hair from her forehead.

"It is just that, Kit. They won't give the time. I wrote to them again yesterday, asking just for a few weeks till I could make some arrangement."

"Oh, they will be sure to let us have time," said Kit, confidently, out of vast experience of such matters. "Of course it's to their own interest to do so. They know that we mean to pay every penny, but of course it's not always convenient to pay a large sum all at once. I thought perhaps you might have been talking about it to Mr. Sinclair last night under the mulberry tree. I would not come out for fear of disturbing you. I did not know what the trouble was,

but I told him in the afternoon that I thought he might be a help to you if you were worried about business."

Mr. Brownlow had let his hands fall from their caressing smoothing of her hair, and her cheek was leaning on his knee, so his eyes were no longer looking close into hers, or else perhaps the truth might have flashed from one to another without need of words.

"Yes, my dear, I was talking to Sinclair last night. He is a very generous, good fellow. He offered at once to advance the money."

His voice seemed to come laboriously and unnaturally, his praise of Sinclair was not spontaneous and hearty. It was a first instalment of his share of the bargain — his good offices with Kit — and the words seemed to leave a bad taste in his mouth.

"Did he? That was very good of him."

Kit was picking up her work, which her sudden movement of sympathy had scattered on the grass, and her words, too, did not come as readily or as enthusiastically as, perhaps, the occasion demanded. But, in her mind, those words of Sinclair's up at the beacon kept recurring uncomfortably — the words he had said in answer to her hasty declaration that she would give anything to save her father from anxiety. "Would you, Kit? I shall remember that another day."

She sat silent a minute, folding and refolding her work, and Mr. Brownlow was trying to frame some expression of his appreciation of Sinclair's kindness,

which would have come with greater readiness if there had not been that paralyzing feeling of obligation to recommend him to Kit.

"He is most kindly anxious to save me from anxiety," he said, his words painfully coinciding with those hasty ones of hers which Kit remembered with such vexation. "I expect he has gone, this morning, to make some arrangement for the payment of the money."

"You will hear to-morrow," Kit interrupted, "from those lawyers, won't you?"

"Yes, Kit, most likely."

"And if they give us time — and they are sure to, aren't they? — couldn't we find some other way of paying the money? Couldn't we, daddy?"

Her cheeks were a little hot and flushed, and her hands were wrung together in her lap as if she were trying to keep down some overpowering emotion. It is so sweet to take things from the hands one loves, there is no galling sense of obligation there. "But perhaps," the Vicar thought, "it is because Stuart had not declared himself openly, and the child's maiden modesty shrinks from appearing in any way to take his feelings for granted."

How little can one read the heart even that beats nearest ours! The old man could not guess the passionate revolt in the girl's heart against receiving this favour from a hand she did not love.

"Of course, my dear, of course! if there were any other way. We shall see, to-morrow, what they say."

And then a dreary little silence fell between them,

sadder by far, then when he had first told the trouble, and she had been full of impracticable and inadequate suggestions of small economies and ways of scraping together the necessary amount ; and presently he got up and went into the house, walking so feebly and looking so frail and bent, that Kit's heart ached at each slow footfall, and she felt as if she would do anything to remove the trouble that was weighing him down.

She was still sitting there, sunk in thought, with her hands lying in unusual idleness on the work in her lap, and her eyes gazing across the lawn, and the gay flower-beds all ablaze with verbena and asters and snap-dragon, to the stately row of holly-hocks and sunflowers, that guarded the way to the kitchen garden, when the click of the gate startled her, and a step on the gravel recalled her, with a painfully beating heart, to the apprehension of what Stuart might have to say to her if he found her by herself.

But it was too late to beat a retreat, and there was an assurance and purpose in his manner, as he came towards her, that made her feel that it was no use attempting to escape, and that she must meet the inevitable as best she could.

He smiled down at her with a look of conscious power, that made her feel so weak and small and defenceless, and he put aside her little, faltering inquiries as to whether he was tired or had had any lunch, without an answer, and drawing up the chair which the old Vicar had occupied half an hour before, sat down close beside her, and, with an

authoritative hand, took away the work with which she was painfully endeavouring to occupy her trembling fingers and nervous eyes, and tossed it aside — the little thimble rolling into the midst of the verbenas, not to be found till the first frost had turned its purple and scarlet glories to dingy black.

“Kit,” he said, “I have something to say to you.”

Silence. But she shrank away from the hand he laid on the arm of her chair, and he saw it; and his tone hardened as he went on —

“You said you would give anything to save your father from his anxiety.”

“He has been talking to me about it,” she managed to say, with those trembling lips.

“Yes! I thought most likely he would. And did he tell you also what I proposed?”

“Yes; he said you had made a most kind and generous offer.”

“And you must have known why I made it?”

Silence. She would have given all she possessed to be able to say she did not understand his meaning, but she was too truthful.

“I was not able to speak last night as decidedly as I could have wished,” he went on, “as I had to make sure of obtaining the money immediately, but, I am glad to say, I have been able to overcome a small difficulty in the matter, and here it is.”

As he spoke he had been opening a letter-case that he took from an inner pocket, and, with the concluding words, he drew out the cheque, and opening it, laid it on Kit’s lap.

"And now, Kit," he said, "I have come to claim your promise."

"They were only silly, thoughtless words," she murmured. "I didn't think — I didn't mean ——"

"But I did think, and I did mean; and I've been thinking and meaning all along. Come, Kit, you can't pretend that you didn't know that I loved you, and that that was why I have been stopping on all this time. I've been very patient, Kit. You've been a little bit hard on me, and kept me at arm's length longer than most girls could have done; but now, shy, difficult, little sweetheart, I've had a chance of proving my love, and I haven't been slow to take it, and I think I deserve a dear, little bride — don't you, Kit?"

He had taken her hands in his, and held them firmly, though she struggled to free them from his grasp, and the cheque he had laid on her lap, fluttered down on to the grass.

She had been crimson when he began to speak, she was deadly white now, and there was an awful feeling stealing over her that the net was closing round her, that there was no escape. He was drawing her towards him with that strong clasp on her poor, little, weakly resisting hands; she could feel his breath hot on her cheek; his eyes were looking into hers with that confident, assured look of triumph that seemed irresistible; heart and strength seemed to fail her — when, of a sudden, what was it that brought Rob back to her mind? Rob, with his simple, true face, and humble, honest love? She

wrenched her hands out of Sinclair's, with an effort that left red and white marks on the slender wrists, and started up and away from him.

"I am sorry," she said — "very sorry. I oughtn't to have let you speak. I'm very grateful, but I couldn't marry you. I'm so sorry, but I couldn't."

"And may I ask why not?" he said, his lips tightening over his teeth in an ugly way he had, which the absence of moustache made noticeable.

"I'm very sorry," she reiterated — "but I couldn't."

"That's scarcely a reason," he said; and then his voice softened a little.

She looked so childish and small, she could not have strength of mind or body to put herself in serious opposition to a man's will, and, most likely, this was only a babyish whim, or exaggerated coyness, out of which she could be coaxed or petted.

"Come, Kit," he went on; "you don't dislike me so very much. Let me try to make you like me better! I'll be content with a very moderate liking to begin with; it will ripen into love by degrees."

But it was in vain that he protested, coaxed, or entreated; Kit, standing at that safe distance from him, behind the bulwark of that wicker garden-chair, was not to be moved from her determination, though she tried to soften it, as well as she could, with gentle, little words of gratitude and expressions of sorrow and regret for vexing him, to the truth of which the tears in her blue eyes testified.

If he had not been so angry, he might almost have been amused at this little bit of a girl, with the quiv-

ering, babyish mouth and eyes full of tears, defying him in this way ; it was like a kitten setting up her back and spitting at a great mastiff, who could finish her with a snap of his powerful jaws.

As he hesitated for a moment in his persuasion, his eye caught sight of the cheque lying on the grass, where it had fallen from her lap. If fair means failed with this troublesome, little girl, he must try others. It could not be helped. She had brought it upon herself ; it was all her own fault, and, perhaps, a bit of a threat would bring her to reason.

"Very well," he said coolly. "Then that is your final decision."

And he picked up the cheque, and folding it deliberately, replaced it in the letter-case from whence he had taken it, knowing all the time that she was watching him with startled, questioning eyes.

"I should have thought, for your father's sake, you might, at any rate, have thought twice before giving such a very decided refusal to my proposal, which, at any rate, has the merit of being disinterested, though it finds so little favour in your eyes. Perhaps you will explain to your father that it is not my fault that he still has to meet a difficulty, from which I would most gladly have saved him."

And he turned and went away, aware that she was standing, grasping the back of the wicker chair, and following him with wide, terrified eyes, with such a bitter look of suffering in them as might well have filled him with remorse.

CHAPTER XXIV.

EXPEDIENTS.

"I will resist such entertainment till my enemy has more power."

SHAKESPEARE.

WHAT a blessing the presence of children and servants is at domestic crises — people before whom appearances must be kept up, and the routine of ordinary life preserved, and the skeleton kept locked up in the cupboard, which, but for them, might stalk about the house, making its grisly presence felt at all hours of the day: actors who introduce interludes of farce or burlesque into the serious drama, or even, sometimes, tragedy of life. Sometimes, perhaps, though we do not appreciate it at the time, and only feel annoyance at the trivial irrelevance breaking into more serious matters: such interruptions as cook coming for orders for the butcher — or Tommy spilling the milk down his pinafore — may have occurred very opportunely to silence the voice that "whispers the o'er fraught heart and bids it break."

It may seem like the step from the sublime to the ridiculous, to come down from such a scene as that, through which Kit had just been, to receive a party of dirty, tired, hungry children who had been spending

a long day on the beach, and to listen and scold and sympathize, according as each vociferous case demanded; but it had certainly a very salutary effect on a poor, young mind that felt stunned and stupefied with the trouble that had come on her.

It was also a great relief to meet Stuart again in the hurly-burly of the family supper, with the protecting presence of Nellie and Christy, Tibby, and Jack, and with Nurse coming in now and again, and joining in the general conversation in a most unconventional manner, and Mary Jane, newly promoted from the national school, performing her duties as parlour-maid in the most solemnly elephantine manner, breathing hard as she handed the plates, with her mouth drawn into a round O, expressive of a fearful sense of responsibility.

Kit found herself addressing ordinary remarks to Sinclair, in a manner that would have seemed impossible half an hour before, when they parted under the mulberry tree; and Sinclair and the Vicar discussed some little bit of parish news brought in by the children, as pleasantly as if there were no cloud of anxiety hanging over one of the two, which it was in the power of the other to dispel.

Say what we will about the hollow masks we wear even in the bosom of our own families, and the absurd conventionalities we keep up in society, we are greatly indebted to them, in the long run, for keeping up a *modus vivendi*, which would be impossible if there were no decent covering to our feelings and sufferings and motives.

The evening that Kit had so much dreaded, passed away outwardly as pleasantly and easily as any other. Tibby declared, when the unwelcome hour of bedtime came, that it had been an awfully jolly evening ; and Kit could almost have laughed in her sore, little heart, at the absurdity in the circumstances of playing a foolish round game for children, including Sinclair among the players — a game called “ happy families ” — in which she had to ask him if Mr. Soot, the sweep, was at home, and, in return, receive the same inquiry about Mrs. Dose, the doctor’s wife. But it tided them safely over the time between supper and bedtime ; and she found herself in the haven of her own room, with Jack sleeping the snoring sleep of the just, and she heard her father and Sinclair bid one another good night on the stairs, neither of them apparently being anxious for a *tête-à-tête*.

In the morning, again, the children’s presence prevented the anxiety for the arrival of the postman — which was, like the Spartan boy’s fox, consuming two, at any rate, of the party — from becoming painfully apparent ; and it also induced Kit to make a masterful attempt to eat some breakfast, to avoid the unerring finger of detection from one or other of the children pointing to her plate, and the voice announcing to all present, “ Look at Kit ! She hasn’t touched her bread and butter.”

As frequently happens when anything is anxiously watched for, it is or seems to be, unusually long in coming ; and as we have seen, old Hobson was leisurely in his habits, and perhaps he was a few min-

utes after time that morning — though, of course, not the eternity that Kit reckoned it. But at last he made his appearance, and the expected blue letter was handed in, and Kit followed her father into the study, and, restored to her old privilege, read its contents over his shoulder.

A month would be allowed for the payment of the money. A month! — it is the same space of time for one as for another: so many days, so many nights, sun-risings, sun-settings — the same to every one; and yet, how different! as was illustrated that day by the look on the two faces reading that letter.

“Only a month!” the old face was saying. “What can be done in a month? Such a poor respite is hardly worth having.”

While to the young face the colour came back, the brightness to the eyes, the mouth lost its sad little droop as hope leapt up afresh in the heart with the feeling, “A month! a whole month! What cannot be done in a month?”

“Daddy,” she said, taking up her old childish place on his knee, and putting her arm round his neck and her cheek close to his — “Daddy, you will tell him, won’t you, that we sha’n’t want his help?”

“Stuart Sinclair?”

“Yes; it was very kind of him.” There was an effort in the words which found an echo in the listener’s heart. “Of course, it was very kind; but I’m sure in a month we can find some other way.”

“To be sure, my dear, to be sure!”

But his agreement had none of the hopeful ring in it that her words had, and already the first buoyancy was oozing away from her heart, though the very consciousness of this made her speak all the more confidently.

"Of course we can. I've been thinking of ever so many plans; and now we have all this time before us, I don't feel a bit afraid. So you will tell him, daddy, won't you?"

"He has not said anything to me about it," the Vicar said, "since he came back from Seadown; so I don't know if he was able to arrange about the loan. He did not seem quite sure about it when he was talking to me the other night."

"I think he has."

Kit's cheek was still pressed against his, and it was a convenient way of escaping the scrutiny of loving old eyes; but he felt a sudden warmth in the soft cheek.

"Has he been talking to you about it, Kit?"

"Yes."

Then a long silence, and she slipped from her perch on his knee to a kneeling position at his feet, but still hiding her face against his coat.

"Perhaps," she said in a low voice, "he may not offer to help us again."

And then she jumped up with a sort of defiance in her look.

"But we don't want his help; and if he says anything to you, you will tell him so, daddy, won't you? I am not going to lose a minute over those plans of

mine, and I'm going right off to set one of them in train now. Now, you're not to look worried or unhappy any more. You didn't know what a woman of business you have for a daughter, nor how much she can do in a month's time."

And then she left him, and he heard her singing as she went upstairs, and calling some words of merry nonsense to the children through the staircase window, and involuntarily felt less despondent himself.

Sinclair heard it, too, but it did not seem to have the same soothing effect on him, for he kicked almost viciously at a pebble on the gravel walk along which he was pacing, and, a minute or two later, he stopped by the study window.

"May I come in?" he said; and on the Vicar's invitation, entered the room where the old man still sat as Kit had left him, with the letter open on the table before him.

"I saw that you had another business letter this morning," Sinclair said. "I hope it was of a satisfactory character?"

"Thank you," the Vicar answered. "Yes, on the whole — in so far as they agree to allow a little time for the repayment of the money."

"Ah!" said Sinclair. It required a good deal of self-restraint to put an amiable interest into this ejaculation, and to keep quite out of sight and hearing the desperate annoyance the Vicar's announcement gave him. "I'm uncommonly glad."

"I shall always feel very grateful to you, Sinclair,

for your generous offer of help in my emergency; but I hope now, that I shall not need to trouble you, and that, in the course of the month, I shall be able to make some other arrangement."

A month! was that all? Sinclair's mind was busy as the Vicar spoke, weighing chances and probabilities if he himself could hold out for a month. If the news of Philip Brownlow's death did not come in the course of it, he was not afraid of this other arrangement, of which the Vicar spoke, even now, without any assurance; and a month of looking debt and poverty in the face might be wholesome discipline for Miss Kit, and bring her to reason. And in a flash of imagination he pictured the little, proud, capricious thing humbled to his hand, and reduced to seeking his favour, instead of shrinking away from his touch and putting as great a distance as possible between them.

And, meanwhile, the Vicar was reiterating his thanks and sense of Sinclair's kindness and consideration, with an eagerness that increased as Sinclair threw a slightly wounded tone into his manner and replies.

"I'm awfully glad for your sake, sir," he said; "but I must own to a little disappointment myself, as I should have been honestly glad to be of use to you; and, indeed, I took considerable trouble in the matter yesterday, which this will testify to." And he took out the cheque which he had shown Kit the day before.

Faugh! what a smell of Russia leather, to remind him of that other letter-case containing the very same

amount when he left New York. He would get another pocket-book the first opportunity without that sickly scent. A leaf of clover fell out of it, too, reminding him of the lawn under the mulberry tree and of the childish, distressed little face reiterating so persistently her refusal to his offer.

"I don't know how to thank you, Sinclair," the old man protested. "I am deeply conscious of your kindness, and so is Kit."

"Is she? Did she tell you I had ventured to open another subject with her yesterday?"

"She did not tell me, but I guessed as much."

Sinclair laughed. "Miss Kit is a little bit difficult, and she did not treat me very kindly yesterday; but I don't despair. I'm a very persistent fellow, and I'm conceited enough to think she does not really dislike me. Well," he said, rising, and putting the cheque back in his pocket—"well, I'm very glad you don't require this, and see your way to manage without my humble assistance. All the same, if at any time you think better of it, and would rather settle off these people, you have only to let me know, and I'll forward this at once."

How good he was! how considerate! The Vicar was quite overcome by this delicate generosity, and especially after Kit had been giving the poor fellow a rebuff.

The notion of Kit being in any way involved in the bargain was abhorrent to the old man, and the idea of having sold Kit had gone far to break his heart. But if the child could have liked this handsome, kind-

hearted young fellow, how simple and happy an explanation of the problem it might have been !

“ But — yes, I think after what happened yesterday, Miss Kit would be glad to get rid of me, at any rate, for the present ; and Dr. Chambers was kind enough to ask me to come to him for a visit, so I thought I would have my traps taken over there this evening. I may be stopping there for a week or two ; but, anyhow, I’ll run over now and then, if I may, and see how you are getting on. And certainly I shall come and say good-bye before I take my final departure from England ; so if I can be of any use either in this ” — and he tapped his breast-pocket — “ or any other way, you’ll know where to find me. Now I’ll take friend Tibby for a final swim, and see if I can charter a cart to take my traps.”

CHAPTER XXV.

KIT'S PLAN.

"To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow;
To feed on hope, to pine with feare and sorrow."

SPENSER.

UPSTAIRS in the bedroom Kit was trying to get some of these various plans of hers, of which she had spoken so hopefully, into shape. That gay little song and merry words, which her father and Stuart had heard as she ran so light-heartedly upstairs, died away from her lips, you may be sure, when she was safely in her own room and sat down to think.

The plans which really had seemed, at any rate, possible in the first moments of relief at the month's reprieve, and with the necessity of putting some sort of hope into the dear old face, failed her now most cruelly when she brought them up one by one for calmer deliberation.

Economy? Oh, yes; but the closest cheese-paring cannot possibly save fifty times the amount it has to spend. Needlework? Why, only that morning Nurse had been rating her for sins of omission and commission in this respect; and even if she were a better needle-woman, where was the time? And, if

she had the time, where were the purses to pay for her handiwork? Eggs and poultry at Seadown? But how could they come into competition with Mrs. Stockton at the farm, who made her living out of the Seadown visitors?

But there was one resource that did not seem to fail her, though, perhaps, to any one else it might have seemed as impracticable as the others. Rob — she would write to Rob. Rob, reader, you will remember, whose best friends smiled indulgently, and called him “poor Rob!” and whose father — and who should know better? — summed him up emphatically as a fool — Rob, who had arrived at man’s estate without attempting to make his own way in the world, and had now taken this precipitate and ill-considered plunge, of which no one knew what might come, but which every one shrewdly suspected would come to nothing.

And yet Kit turned to the thought of Rob with a comforting feeling of assurance that he would help; the perfect certainty of his will to do so perhaps shutting her eyes to the probable want of ability.

She would write to him at once. And when Sinclair came out of the study, after his talk with the Vicar, he saw the very unusual sight of Kit sitting up writing a letter.

It was a more unusual thing than even Sinclair imagined, for hitherto all Kit’s interests had been included within the four walls of the Vicarage, or, at any rate, within the confines of the parish, and there had been no necessity for letter writing when all com-

munications could be done by word of mouth. Now and then she had written to Rob at school, when there was any great piece of news of public interest ; as, for example, when they all had the measles, or when Juno, the retriever at the farm, had four puppies. She generally wrote to him on his birthday, too, and now and then would have to write an order to a tradesman at Seadown ; but I think this had been the length and breadth of her correspondence, and, accordingly, there was a certain pomp and ceremony in sitting down to write a letter to Canada, which called more attention to the fact than would have been the case with another girl, who might have scribbled off half a dozen pages to go to the Antipodes between two sets of tennis, or in the middle of afternoon tea.

"Kit is writing to Rob," Tibby told Sinclair as they went down to the beach with towels over their shoulders.

For, of course, all the family must needs know of the letter ; and before Kit had written the date and "Dear Rob," she was entrusted with so many messages that the main object of the letter bade fair to be crowded out for want of space ; and Christy even suggested that the farewell book-mark, heavily weighted with beads, might be enclosed.

"Ah," said Sinclair, in reply to Tibby's information, "has she got his address?"

"No ; but he's somewhere in Canada."

"That's rather a large order by way of address."

Tibby supposed it was. There was a spot of ink

over the locality where Rob was supposed to be on the map of North America, owing to determining the spot with pens full of ink.

Sinclair smiled to himself at this very forlorn little hope being the best card in Kit's hand. That cheery little song on the stairs had made him afraid there might be a trump of which he did not know. Did she imagine that by farming in Canada fortunes were made in a couple of months, or that nuggets were turned up by the plough-share?

"I am going over to Seadown, to stop a bit with the doctor, and I could find out the address, if your sister likes?"

"Oh, I say! are you going away? What a jolly shame! But you'll come back, won't you? Father won't let me bathe by myself, so I don't get a chance of swimming unless you're here. You'll come back?"

"Yes, I shall come back."

"Kit, Mr. Sinclair says he will post your letter for you, and get the right address."

Kit was still sitting over the letter when they got back, gazing uncertainly at the envelope directed, "Robert Chambers, Esq.," an address that Tibby did not recognize when he looked over her shoulder.

"Oh, I thought you were writing to Rob!"

"Tibby seemed to think you were not sure of Rob Chambers' address."

It was a comfort in dealing with Stuart Sinclair that he could keep up the outward politeness and pleasantness, even though close beneath the surface

were emotions and agitations that others might make no effort or be powerless to conceal.

"Dr. Chambers has asked me to go and keep him company for a bit."

"Yes; father told me."

"He will know his son's address, and, if you will entrust me with the letter, I will see that it is directed and despatched."

Kit hated herself for the momentary distrust that made her hesitate. What a wretched suspicious creature she was getting! and, after all, there was nothing in the letter that Sinclair was not welcome to see. It began with "Dear Rob," and ended with "Love from all, yours affectionately, Kit;" and in between was told the trouble they were in, in a very simple, abrupt, school-girlish way, and without any mention of Stuart Sinclair from beginning to end.

The most penetrating eye could not have detected that before she closed the letter she put her lips to the dear, honest, simple, old name at the top of the page, and thought for a moment of that evening on the beach. But I think, after all, there must have been something suspicious to betray the silly little action, seeing that when it reached its destination the recipient did the same by the name at the end.

Kit hurried to atone for her hesitation by placing the letter in his hand.

"It is very good of you," she said; "I don't like to trouble you."

"Don't you remember, Miss Kit," he answered, with a slightly reproachful tone in his voice, "that

I was taken on once here as odd man or errand boy, to fetch and carry for you, and you were all to make use of me? I have not had my discharge yet, and the Vicar says I may come over now and then while I'm at Seadown, to see if there is any odd job I can do for you. And please remember, Miss Kit, that if you want anything, you have only to send a line to me at Seadown, and it shall be done directly."

It might have been only Kit's fancy that there was more meaning in these than appeared on the surface of their half-joking politeness; and it was, she was sure, pure accident that made him, as he spoke, draw out the letter-case, which she knew contained the cheque, which a word from her would place at her father's disposal.

Christy and Tibby standing by did not detect any *arrière pensée* behind the words.

"You're like the genii of the lamp," Christy said, "and will appear just when we want you."

"Or like the dog with eyes as big as the round tower of Copenhagen, who came whenever a match was struck on the old tinder-box," added Tibby.

"That's about it," said Sinclair; "only Miss Kit must hold the lamp and the tinder-box, for the dog with the big eyes wouldn't get a moment's rest if he had to dance attendance on you."

It was all a joke, but it was a joke that gave a prick to an already sore little heart, reminding her of her power to set everything right.

On the way to Seadown that evening, in the cart he got from the farm, with a raw-boned, patient grey

horse in the shafts, driven by a hobbledehoy from the plough, with a broad, dazzled-looking, red face, the complexion of which was several shades darker than his pale-blue eyes or straw-coloured hair, Sinclair debated over that letter of Kit's, which lay in his pocket against the Russia leather case, his reflections not being interrupted by any conversation from his driver, whose wisdom, if any, was inarticulate, his thoughts being rendered a little jerky now and then when the wheel went into a rut on the road, or the driver laid into the thin grey ribs in front of him with a stumpy whip.

Sinclair did not at all suspect that letter to Rob of being a love-letter, which, of course, it was not, in form or expression ; and if it were just an appeal to him for help in their money difficulties, it did not much matter if it reached its destination or not, for it could do neither harm nor good, as he certainly could not help the Brownlows ; and if he wrote to his father, there would be no complications to be feared.

So, on the whole, he concluded to let the letter go ; and soon after his arrival at Seadown, he handed it over to the doctor to add the necessary direction.

What did it matter to him what Rob Chambers' address might be ? And the doctor, who was talking away hard on some much more interesting subject than his only son, wrote the address, and tossed the letter on to a heap of others that were on a side table ready to be posted ; and for an hour the letter lay there, with the address clearly to be deciphered, almost within reach of Sinclair's hand, without his

taking the trouble to read it: "Robert Chambers, Esq., c/o Frank Guest, Esq., Macklin, Ontario Upper Canada."

And then the letters for the post were fetched by a servant, and taken away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SUMMONS.

"Cans't thou not minister to a mind diseased
And with some sweet antidote oblivious
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?"

SHAKESPEARE.

HOW that month crawled! how it galloped! It depended how Kit regarded it — whether she were reckoning the first possible day when the answer from Rob might be expected, or the day when the money must be paid — whether that answer had arrived or not — or if she counted the days that had gone, since the reprieve had been granted, with the agonizing feeling that nothing had been done to avert the catastrophe.

Every day of this suspense seemed to leave its mark on the old Vicar, though Kit strenuously combated the idea that he was looking ill, or that he was more feeble and bent than he had been for some time past; and she flew out in a manner quite unlike her usual gentle, kindly way when the village people, after their painfully outspoken fashion, commented on his appearance.

"He be quite a burden to see, surelie!"

“ He be breaking up, missy, that a-be ! ”

Nurse, too, though she snapped off other people's heads when they made these gloomy remarks — which, according to poor people's etiquette, were intended to be complimentary — was a Job's comforter when Kit appealed to her to confirm her favourable opinion of her father's health. Nurse was puzzled at this new turn in affairs, and at Sinclair's having gone off to Seadown without, as far as she knew, settling matters with Kit ; so she accordingly introduced little shafts aimed at the girl into her mourning over the master's not being a bit like himself, and being out of sorts and queer-like — by hinting that it was all worry as upset him, and that girls were all very well, but it was a pity the master had not got a son, something like Mr. Sinclair now, to talk a bit of sense now and then.

In the ballad of “ Auld Robin Grey,” it was the father who urged her “ sair ” to marry the rich suitor when Jamie was at sea, and Kit had not this to endure ; but perhaps, unconsciously, Mr. Brownlow enacted the part of the mother in the ballad who “ looked in my face, till my heart was like to break,” which is more effectual than any urging, as it does not rouse what persuasion sometimes does — a wholesome feeling of opposition.

Sinclair came over every two or three days ; but generally Kit managed to miss him, and sometimes she missed him without any management.

It was a relief when she came in from a long walk, or blackberrying expedition with the children, to find

that he had come and gone; but sometimes she debated if it would not be better to face the embarrassment of meeting him, as, after a long talk alone with him, there was more of that wistful, little look in her father's eyes, as if he were thinking how easily things might go right, and wondering why they should not do so.

No doubt she was nervous and overstrained; but she construed every word he said about Sinclair into a plea in his favour, and a gentle, little, piteous entreaty to her to relent.

"Sinclair has been talking about Tibby," Mr. Brownlow said one evening, after a visit which Kit had missed through blackberrying. "He has been saying what a sharp little fellow he is, and what a pity it is he should not go to a good school, and perhaps to Oxford."

Stuart had only just gone, and there was still the parental pride and pleasure at hearing the boy praised, asserting itself before it was drowned by the flood of the impossibility of realizing the brilliant prospect.

Kit was taking a thorn out of her finger with great care, so that was, perhaps, why she did not respond, for she was generally the first to join in the glorification of one of the family.

"Does it hurt very much?" Jack asked, coming in just then with fingers and mouth bearing testimony to his afternoon's occupation.

And Kit, who generally made so light of any little pain or ache of her own, looked up from the thorn with a face quivering with the anguish.

“ Yes, Jack, it hurts awfully — awfully ! ”

To be standing in the way of Tibby — little, sharp, bright-eyed, sensible Tibby — for whom so much was possible with the rich brother-in-law to launch him and help him on. It was no exaggeration to say that it hurt awfully — to realize that she was doing this.

And that night Kit took herself severely in hand to find out why she was so selfish and unreasonable and ridiculous. Why should not she marry Stuart Sinclair, who loved her? — yes, she supposed he loved her, or else why should he want to marry her without a penny, and, worse than that, in debt and difficulty? Yes, she had not even the excuse of doubting his love. She was very straight with herself, and insisted on setting down everything that there was to his credit — and what a lot there was to place to it! — beginning with the honest disinterested love. He was generous and considerate, a gentleman, brave and manly, good-looking and well-mannered. Every one liked him, except perhaps, Jack and Bogey. He had it in his power, and was only too willing to make the present smooth and free from care, and to brighten the future prospects of the family, and to make her father's old age quiet and peaceful. And against him — what? Only a girl's whim. Was it only a whim: the sickening terror and aversion that seized her when she thought of him as a lover, and the feeling that she would rather be in her grave near mother than be Stuart's wife?

So this severe review of her feelings only ended in

a passionate outburst of crying, stifled in the bed-clothes, sobbing out, "I couldn't! I couldn't! I couldn't!"—without a why or a wherefore to give as a reason for such conduct.

Perhaps Kit's knowledge of astronomy was not very much more extensive than Rob's, for she looked for that great bright star—which she somehow connected with Rob—where it had been in June, over the barn roof, and felt all the more desolate because it was not there—not understanding the ways and manners of planets.

The stars in their course fought against Sisera, so now they seemed to be fighting for Sinclair, when Kit's sad young eyes scanned the great starry heavens in vain for Rob's star, that had been such a comfort when he first went away, and now had played her false.

After each of these visits of Sinclair's—when Kit was out—there seemed something left behind to sting and smart—some hint of what might have been, or, worse still, of what might be, if Kit changed her mind. And, when Kit was at home, it was no better; for the concern he showed over the Vicar's altered looks, wrung her heart almost unendurably—for there was no blinding herself to the feebleness and depression that seemed to become more manifest when Stuart was there taking note of them. Kit would feel almost angry at small, invalid ways that had crept in by degrees, and been tenderly fostered by her when she and her father were alone, but which she would gladly have kept out of sight before Sinclair.

And thus the month crept or hurried along ; and now Kit reckoned an answer might be expected from Rob in, at any rate, a few days. She would not lay herself open to disappointment by saying to-day or to-morrow, as, of course, there might be some unavoidable delay. Nor would she allow herself to watch at the gate for the postman's coming, or stop abruptly in the occupation of the moment when the old man's leisurely footfall sounded on the path.

There had been one or two other forlorn little efforts made to escape this inevitable trouble, that came heavily towards them through those pleasant, fresh, September days ; and that worse trouble that came behind, taking more distinct shape day by day, and bearing Stuart Sinclair's form with a look of triumph in his handsome eyes — sparks of which she thought she could see there already when she caught his glance.

Kit had written to some relations of her mother, whose names and addresses she had with difficulty discovered, and had received one of the letters back marked "unknown," and the other had been answered by a curt postcard, disclaiming all connection with the person mentioned. Mr. Brownlow's appeal to some old college friends, rumours of whose wealth had reached even to Lowburn, was equally in vain.

Over at Seadown, Dr. Chambers was glad of Stuart Sinclair's company. The season there was tailing off, though it lasted further into September than usual that year from the beauty of the weather, and every leisure moment was filled up with the book which —

now that difficulty about the initial expenses was solved — was being proceeded with in a highly gratifying manner.

Stuart, besides his opportune offer to guarantee the money, took an intelligent interest in the subject ; and Dr. Chambers found him a most congenial companion, and even intrusted him with the verification of certain dates, and the revision of parts which required slight alterations.

So, when Sinclair once or twice suggested that he was paying an unconscionably long visit and had better move on, Dr. Chambers would not hear of it.

“ But I think little miss over at Lowburn is wonderfully slow in making up her mind. Many men would not put up with it. Of course, it's no concern of mine, and it's all the better for me if it gives me your company ; but there are other girls in the world besides Kit Brownlow — and girls with a bit of money, too — whose face is not their only fortune. Now, there's so-and-so, and so-and-so — pretty girls, too, and not at all indisposed to consider a good-looking young fellow like you ; and they'll come into a nice little fortune when the old man dies. I saw them looking you up and down yesterday, when we were walking on the esplanade, and they drove past in their pony carriage.”

But Sinclair shook his head and laughed, and the doctor wondered anew at his persistent following up of a little chit who did not know her own mind, and kept him dangling on such an unwarrantable time.

It was one evening at the end of September. The

weather had broken up, and the day had been wet and windy, and the evening was damp and chilly, making the bright fire in the consulting-room a comfortable sight as the two men turned in there after dinner.

Stuart had postponed an intended visit to Lowburn on account of the rain, and Dr. Chambers had cut his rounds as short as possible, and was now prepared for a comfortable evening, and to look over some work that Sinclair had been doing for him during the day.

There had been a letter from Herr Müller, in the morning, of a satisfactory nature. Dr. Chambers had only had time to glance through it in the morning, but now he could thrash it out with Sinclair. He was altogether in a genial and unusually unbent condition, as was testified by his actually having put on his slippers and an old coat, and relaxed the usual severe neatness of his attire. He pulled up his armchair, and stretched out his feet to the blaze, with an outward display of ease and comfort that the outer world would have hardly believed him capable of.

So it was no wonder that an expression of great irritation crossed his face when a ring at the bell sounded, followed almost immediately by a second, and that again by a third, before the servants had time to get to the door to open it.

Dr. Chambers was far too gentlemanly to use bad words; but he had a way of opening his nostrils and tightening his lips, which was equivalent to very strong language, and which the servants described as "master looking nasty." Now there was a deliberate





settling into his chair, and drawing the lamp to a more convenient position, which did not augur well for any one who wanted to rout him out into the rain and darkness, even though it might be a case of life and death demanding his attention. He went on serenely with what he was saying to Sinclair, as if he was unconscious of voices in the hall raised into something very like an altercation.

Hawkins' voice had a penetrating tone, and Sinclair could hear her say —

“Well! I never did know such impudence as you boys! What next, I wonder? Ringing the visitors' bell, too! and at this time of night! Now, run away! If you've any note, I'll give it to master; but it ain't likely as he'll turn out again such a night as this. No, you won't! It's not consulting hours, and he won't see no one were it ever so. So, you just be off! making the hall in such a mess with your dirty boots, as I don't know whatever cook will say!”

And then ensued sounds of a scuffle, as if this persistent patient were making his way in spite of Hawkins' opposition.

And then the door burst open, and Tibby Brownlow stood there — very small, very wet, very excited. He had no hat, and his hair — straightened out of its usual crisp curl — was plastered across his forehead, and there was a scratch and a smear of dirt that told of a possible fall on the way, to which also patches of mud on knees and jacket-sleeves also bore witness; and there was a mark, as if a tear might have rolled down the smeared cheek, when it was too dark for

any one to perceive such unmanly weakness in the brave little heart, that had struggled along those eight miles of solitude and darkness from Lowburn.

There was a scared look still in the eyes that had looked out so fearfully into the blackness, and seen great shapes of unaccountable objects that daylight had never shown him — eyes that had begun desperately seeking for the lights of Seadown long before there was the slightest prospect of seeing them.

And then there had been, what was a hundred times worse than the loneliness, the meeting a tramp, who, to Tibby's eyes, appeared gigantic, and who caught hold of him and bid him turn out his pockets — which was more alarming in idea than reality, as the pockets only contained a knife with a broken blade, and a few bits of slate pencil.

Tibby had managed to slip out of his grasp and make off, pursued by the tramp, till the boy fell into a ditch, and the man passed him in the dark.

But now these perils and dangers of the way were over, and Tibby had reached his destination.

"Why, hullo!" Sinclair said. "It's Tibby Brownlow! Is anything the matter at Lowburn? Here, steady, man!"

For the warm room and the lights, and Sinclair's friendly face, were beginning to swim round Tibby in a remarkable way, and the legs that had held out so stoutly, to fail him; and there was a lump in his throat that, if he had not been a big fellow of twelve, capable of coming off at a moment's notice to fetch a doctor, might have ended in a flood of tears.

It was not till after a few minutes that he was able to explain why he had come, or say anything but, "It's father," and then choke and hide his face in the pillow of the sofa where Sinclair had put him; but, presently, it came out.

"He went out after tea to see some one, and, coming back, fell by the churchyard gate. We don't know how he did it—whether it was slippery with the rain—but Nurse thought, perhaps, he was giddy. And we didn't know if he struck his head against the gate-post; but when they brought him in—Joe Tillett found him, and he and Smithson carried him home—he didn't know Kit, and kept asking for her, as if Kit was some one else."

More hiding of the face became necessary here; and the doctor, with subdued impatience, began turning over the papers on the table, which were to have been the absorbing interest of the evening, and now had to be set aside in this tiresome manner.

"Did Kit send you for me?" asked Sinclair.

"No," was the reply, with a certain air of offended dignity, as if Sinclair were treating him too much as a child, to be sent hither and thither at the bidding of a sister. "She doesn't know anything about it; and it's not you I came for, but the doctor. I came to fetch him, for I'm sure father's very ill"—with a spasm of the throat and a desperate gulp to overcome it—"though Nurse does try to make light of it, and say he'll be all right to-morrow."

Perhaps it was as well that Tibby's eyes were not so clear just then as usual, and that the sofa cushion

frequently obscured them, for Dr. Chambers did not look propitious; and, I think, if Sinclair had not been there, Tibby might have saved himself the trouble of that long, dark walk, for nothing would have induced the doctor to stir.

Indeed, it needed all Sinclair's arts to produce the desired effect; and Tibby, lying there in a half-drowsy state of exhaustion, heard bits of the discussion carried on between the men at the table, feeling gratefully that Sinclair had taken the matter in hand, and would do the best he could for him.

"Well, if you put it that way, I suppose I must go," said the doctor at last; "but I can't, for the life of me, see why the boy should not stay the night—he could have Rob's room—and I could go over to-morrow. The old gentleman may be all right by this time, if it was only a faint; and if it was something worse—— Well, you'd better tell Hawkins to give the boy some supper, and order the brougham. I tell you what, Sinclair, I'm doing this just to oblige you. I suppose you know your own business, and I hope the young lady——"

But Sinclair knew that Tibby's ears were sharp, so he carried him off to have some supper out of ear-shot of the doctor's comments; and, finding that the coachman was round at the Blue Posts, and cook more than doubtful if he would be fit to drive if summoned at that hour from that hostelry, Sinclair himself undertook to harness the horse and drive the doctor over.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DOCTOR'S VISIT.

"Present fears are less than horrible misgivings."

SHAKESPEARE.

THE anxiety as to what had become of Tibby was beginning almost to outweigh that for her father, or rather perhaps to join with that to rack Kit's already sufficiently strained heart.

She did not notice his absence for some time, being entirely absorbed in the quiescent old figure that lay, it seemed to her, so unnaturally still on the bed, where they had carried him when they brought him in.

The shock of that bringing in was enough to shatter her — the white head leaning against Joe Tillett's shoulder, and the clumsy tenderness with which the two men carried him, and the right hand hanging down with that terribly lifeless look. She had caught up the hand, and dried and warmed it against her cheek, for it was wet with the rain, and cold, she told herself, from that cause too. The others were so terror-struck and trembling she had to rouse herself to comfort them, and scold them for being so silly and frightened.

Tibby was there then, she knew, for she remembered how very white his face was under the sunburn,

and how he fetched a cushion to put under his father's head. He did not know her when he first opened his eyes, and kept asking for Kit — "Where's Kit?" But this did not last long. Thank God, it did not last, for that seemed worst of all, and he seemed quite himself when they had helped him into bed, and she sat by his side, and read the evening Psalms to him, which he followed with silently moving lips, and thanked her, and said he felt better, and would go to sleep.

"He lies so still," she whispered to Nurse, who came in now and again to see how he was.

"And all the better," she whispered back. "You wouldn't have him restless and tossing? He do be sleeping beautiful, as is a pleasure to see. Come away, missy, and have some supper like a good child."

And then they first missed Tibby, and sought for him in vain all over the house and sodden garden, where the leaves lay in heaps, and in the stable, and in the barn. Nellie and Christy and Jack, who had crept into the kitchen to get scolding encouragement from Nurse and sit on the fender, had seen nothing of him.

"Perhaps he's in father's study?"

Already there had grown a sort of sacredness about father's study, where, up till now, Tibby had done his lessons, and Christy had kept her doll, and Jack had amassed rubbishy little treasures safe there from molestation from Nurse. But now, not one of them would have thought of annexing the lead-pencil left on the writing-table, though it was generally con-

sidered fair game when it could be pounced on out of father's pocket.

But Tibby was not there, though Kit would almost have been glad to find him up to some ingenious piece of mischief, to take off the solemn quiet of the room, which struck chill on her heart.

She closed the book that lay open on the table quite reverently, as you might close a book that would not be needed again by the reader, and then feverishly tried to find the page it was opened at, "as, of course, father will want to go on where he left off."

But where was Tibby? Vexation at his being so thoughtless and heartless as to be out of the way when they were all so anxious, gradually was merged in fear, lest any mishap had befallen the boy; and Nurse, who pretended to think nothing of it, and who tossed her head with contemptuous little remarks, such as "Good riddance;" "Master Mischief's out of the way;" "Naught's never in danger," betrayed her anxiety by sending Bessie over to the farm to inquire if he were there, and by going repeatedly to the gate to listen and peer through the darkness.

But even with father ill and Tibby missing, supper had to be gone through, and the children sent to bed, in spite of their grievous entreaties, and the house must be closed as if Tibby's bed were not empty; for father had roused, and asked what time it was, and if the children had gone to bed.

And then Nurse came into the dining-room, and sat in the armchair, and Kit sat at her feet, and laid her head on Nurse's lap, to be stroked by the kind

old hand grown hard and old in work for the master and the children.

The Vicar's room was overhead, so any movement up there could be heard, and through the window, set a little open, every sound on the road or in the village would be audible to ears sharpened by anxiety.

They did not talk lest even whispers might disturb the sleeper upstairs, and make him discover their anxiety; and, besides, there was nothing to say, as they had answered each other's question, "Where can he be?" in every imaginable way, and dismissed each suggestion as impossible.

But soon after eleven Kit suddenly sat up and listened, and, in spite of Nurse's despondent and incredulous shake of the head, went across and pushed the window wider open, and leaned out, getting a shower-bath from the long, wet rose branches.

"There's something coming along the road," she said; "I can hear wheels."

And a minute after Nurse's duller ears were convinced, and — yes, there was the grunting sound of the brake put on some wheels coming down the steep bit of hill leading into the village.

And before the brougham reached the Vicarage gate, Kit was there — a dim, ghostly, little figure, in the light of the carriage lamps, and Nurse behind, with her skirt turned over her head to keep off the rain, which beat unheeded on Kit's reckless young head.

"Oh, Tibby!" Kit sobbed, only conscious of a

small figure up by the driver's side preparing to scramble down before the carriage had stopped.

If it had been the Queen herself with her four cream-coloured horses, Kit would have seen nothing but the boy, and she caught him in her arms, lifting him off his feet, in the ecstasy of relief, in a manner which Tibby might have felt to be derogatory to his dignity if it had not been so dark and he so desperately glad to get home.

"Oh, Tibby, we could not think what had become of you!" And she would have pulled and half-carried him into the house without a look at the conveyance that had brought him, or a question as to where he had been, or how he had come back, if Tibby had not extricated himself from her hold, and turned to the carriage door, out of which Dr. Chambers was emerging with his usual imperturbable dignity.

"I've been to fetch the doctor, Kit," Tibby said, with a thrill in his voice of conscious pride; "and Dr. Chambers has come to see father."

"I hope, my dear young lady," Dr. Chambers said, "that there is no serious cause for your anxiety."

I am afraid few of my readers do not know the infinite relief of a doctor's arrival, when the heart is sick with weighing hopes and fears, either of which may be utterly unfounded, and alternately trying bravely to face the worst, and to persuade one's self that one is unnecessarily anxious. It is difficult at these times to realize that the issues of life and death

are not really in the hands of the medical practitioner, who comes in with that superior knowledge which makes him appear half a divinity in ignorant eyes, and that the verdict he gives as he comes out of the sick-room is not invariably infallible.

So Dr. Chambers, stepping out of his brougham, was, in Kit's eyes, a veritable *deus ex machinâ*, who was bringing restored health in his hand; and she did not give a thought, till after he had gone, to the fee painfully increased by the night journey and by each mile of road; and she only thought how clever and quick and splendid it was of Tibby to have thought of it and done it all of his own accord, without consulting any one.

And the result of Dr. Chambers' visit to the Vicar's bedroom was distinctly comforting. He did not think there was any danger to be apprehended, at least at present. The patient must be kept very quiet, and on no account to be agitated or excited about anything.

"You must keep business matters out of sight for a bit, Miss Kit," he said, with a kind, fatherly manner that greatly impressed Nurse, to whom he gave instructions as to nourishment and the making of beef-tea, which she would have resented in any one less grand and imposing in appearance.

"It is mainly debility and nervous prostration, and we must build him up a bit. I will call again to-morrow, and bring some medicine, as I suppose there's no chemist in Lowburn to make up a prescription?"

"So considerate," Nurse thought ; while Kit stood in a daze, having heard nothing more since he spoke of keeping business matters out of sight, with a sudden remembrance of the day of the month, and of a letter of reminder that might be expected any day now.

From this she was aroused by the doctor's words —

"I think my coachman deserves a word of thanks from you, Miss Kit. I hardly think even your brother's urgent entreaties would have brought me if it had not been for him."

"I am afraid he must have got very wet," Kit said, trying to forget the business part of the prescription. "Tibby is with him in the yard. They are giving the horse a feed. Would he come in and have some supper or anything?"

Dr. Chambers laughed. "You see, my man who usually drives me was not available to-night ; so I scarcely think I could have come over if it had not been for Stuart Sinclair, who volunteered to act as coachman."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PRESCRIPTION.

"Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream."

SHAKESPEARE.

"**A** LETTER for father!" Nellie said next morning.

The children did a good deal of standing and looking out of window that day. It seemed unfeeling to settle to any employment, and Kit was too much occupied to take the lessons; and, of course, practising scales on the piano, which was often an outlet when you felt very virtuous and had no other means of displaying the feeling, was not to be thought of.

Indeed, they began the day by talking in whispers, and going about on tiptoe, till Kit assured them that father liked hearing them about, and was rather fidgeted at the unwonted quiet.

Tibby was in a very subdued condition, not to say cross — a reaction that often follows a heroic effort; and he and Bogey fell foul of one another several times, from interference with that privileged animal's right to sit in whichever chair he fancied.

So Bogey joined the party in the window — Nellie, Christy, and Jack — and watched the mulberry leaves

come eddying down to join their yellow brothers on the lawn, and the horse-chestnuts from the tree beyond fall with a "plop," and split their thorny green cases, and display their shining brown nuts. There were cobwebs all along the holly hedge, studded with myriads of rain-drops; and when the sun came out for a bit — though it was only a little watery gleam — it lighted up a glitter of diamonds beyond all the riches of Golconda.

They were discussing the simple miracle of the cobwebs, and whether thousands of spiders had been at work in the night, or whether it was not more likely to have been done by fairies — this last conjecture in a very low voice, to escape Tibby's censorious ear — when the postman came in, and, handing the letters in to them, stopped to ask how the parson was, with a glance at the window above with its unusually drawn blind.

"A letter for father!" And Kit, who had come in with a cup of beef-tea on her way to the sick-room, took it away with her.

It did not need more than the first glance to tell her that it was one of those terrible business letters which, at all costs, must be kept from her father. At all costs?

She was too busy to think of it now, so she slipped it into her pocket till there was leisure to consider it.

Father was going to sit up in the armchair while she and Nurse made his bed; and she had to give him his beef-tea, and to see about a variety of small matters for his comfort. It was quite a relief to build up

a heap of little necessary business between herself and the dreadful moment of leisure when she must consider that letter.

Luckily her father made no inquiries about the post—a want of interest, which, though convenient, struck her as a bad symptom, as he, too, had been watching anxiously every morning for what the post might bring. But he seemed in a half-drowsy condition, and, though he roused himself to answer when she spoke, and thanked her and Nurse for all they did for him, it was in a mechanical sort of way, as if the lips were speaking independently of the mind; and when she read aloud, she seemed to detect—so fine was the sympathy between them—that he was listening to her voice, which soothed and calmed him, but not to the sense of what she read.

It was not till the afternoon that she found time to open the letter—till after Dr. Chambers had come and gone.

He pronounced his patient better; but the prostration was still great, and everything must be done to keep up his strength, and above all, he must be kept quiet, and no worries allowed to come near him. Dr. Chambers was very emphatic on this last point, and, while he spoke, that letter in Kit's pocket seemed to grow heavier and heavier, till it threatened to weigh her to the ground, and the doctor wondered more and more what it was in this little pasty-faced girl that made a fine young fellow like Sinclair so keen in his wooing.

She had looked pretty enough that day when he

drove over with Sinclair, but she was one of those women who lose their looks directly they have a sleepless night or two. Well, Sinclair knew his own business best!

"Well," he said, as he took leave of the little pasty-faced girl, "have you any message for my coachman of last night? He asked me to tell you that, if there is anything he can do, and you will send him word, he will come directly. Ah, Miss Kit, you're a lucky young lady to have such a *preux chevalier*."

A dull colour rose in the girl's cheeks, making a hard straight line under the dark rings that trouble and watching had drawn round her sad eyes.

"No message?" continued the doctor, drawing on his well-fitting gloves. "Well, a line by post will be sure to find him. I don't think I need call again for a day or two, unless there is any decided change, when, of course, you will let me know. He might come down for a bit to-night, when the house is shut up and the rooms warm. Good morning."

Kit walked slowly back up the garden path, after having accompanied the doctor to the gate; and she stopped half-way to look at the geranium bed that had been so bright and gay a short time ago, and now had only bare blackish spikes, washed bare of scarlet petals, and coarse green foliage turning to yellow here and there.

It was very tiresome of Kit, the watchers at the dining-room window declared, not to reward them for their consideration in keeping well out of the doctor's way, by coming straight in to tell them what

he thought of father. And when she came they could get very little out of her except that father was better, and might get up a little that evening ; and she asked Nellie to go up into his room, and read to him a bit. She herself went to her bedroom, and locked herself in ; and, when Jack came up to the door with a cut finger, she did not open for him, but bid him run down to Nurse, and ask her to tie it up — which was not what Jack desired, seeing that he had been using a knife which Nurse had expressly enjoined him not to touch, and “Serve you right !” is poor balm for a cut finger.

Kit was kneeling by her bed when she opened the lawyer’s letter, which was just what she expected — a demand for the payment of the money — and when she had read it, she let her head drop on her arms stretched out across the white coverlet, and knelt there a long time, only raising her head to answer, in that unusually unfeeling way, to Jack’s piteous demand for rag and consolation.

And when she got up at last, I think Dr. Chambers would have wondered all the more what Sinclair could see in this girl ; and yet, I fancy, a painter drawing a picture of Iphigenia, at the moment when “the stern, black-bearded kings with wolfish eyes” waited to see her die, might have caught an idea from the little wan face, and the set purpose of the pale young mouth.

“Shall I take your letter to the post?” Tibby asked, a few minutes later, meeting Kit with her hat on, going out with a letter in her hand.

"No, thank you," she answered. "A run will do my headache good."

"Does it ache?" asked Tibby. "I thought you looked rather funny after the doctor had been."

"Shall I come with you?" asked forgiving Jack, overlooking the want of sympathy about his finger.

"No, thank you" — again. "I want you and Tibby to make up a good fire in the dining-room, and draw the sofa close up, and put plenty of cushions, for father's coming down after tea."

And then she ran off down the garden path and along the road through the village. The letter was directed to Stuart Sinclair, and contained the following words —

"You said I might send if we wanted your help. Will you come to-morrow to Lowburn Bay about three.
— KIT."

She hurried along towards the post-office, not noticing the greetings and calls from various cottages to ask how the Vicar was, and what the doctor said, and sending the white ducks waddling wildly hither and thither, with sad want of consideration for their not being constructed with a view to hurry.

She was out of breath and trembling when she reached the post-office, more than was to be accounted for even from her quick walk, and, as she dropped the letter into the box, she gave a little gasping sob, and caught at the white railings, over which a sodden sunflower nodded its great black face at her.

She was herself again the moment after, and had quite a pleasant little chat with Mrs. Stokes, and a word or two with several others, whom she met on the road home, making amends for having passed them so cavalierly before ; and she came in looking quite bright, and laughed at Jack's labours with the kitchen bellows, and approved all Tibby's arrangements for father's comfort ; and Nurse in the kitchen stopped in her ironing to listen to the (in these days) unaccustomed sound of Kit's laugh, which used to be music in the Vicarage from morning to night in the happy old days.

Kit was altogether in a gay mood that evening, and there was no one to detect that the gaiety was a trifle forced, though once or twice father looked a little bit wistfully at her.

He was certainly much better, and it needed all Kit's playful authority to prevent him from asserting himself to be quite well, and repudiating the glasses of milk and cups of beef-tea which made their appearance, as he declared, at unnecessarily short intervals. Jack and Christy had to mount guard on either side of the sofa to prevent his getting up to interview the parishioners who came dropping in to ask after him, till Nurse grew very short and snappy in her replies, and inclined to hint that one might tell another and not come bothering there.

"It shall all be pleasant and happy and bright to-night," Kit kept saying to herself, "and to-morrow morning too. It's my last day — my last day. I will be happy just this last day, and afterwards — Well, I won't think of it."

She slept on the sofa in her father's room, as she had done the night before, and when she heard the regular breathing that told that the old man slept, she too fell asleep, and dreamt of going blackberrying with Rob — pleasant, childish, inconsequent dreams, such as sleep brings out of its mysterious storehouse, sometimes to send to minds racked with anguish and perplexity.

It was harder work being happy next morning. You cannot cultivate a feeling so easily in the daylight, or pretend not to see the lowering future, and make a separate little patch of sunshiny present irrespective of it. So Kit's cheerfulness was a little bit jerky and uneven, and she found herself continually glancing at the clock, and calculating how much longer remained to her before three o'clock came. Why had she fixed three? She was free to have said a later hour, and thus have gained more time.

And then she would wish that it had come and was over, as Iphigenia might have wished when "the bright death quivered at the victim's throat." But with her it touched and she knew no more, while with Kit it was the life, not death, that was the sacrifice.

Father was down to dinner to-day, and sitting in his old place, at the head of the table, though Kit did the carving, and he was not even allowed to help himself to potatoes.

And after dinner he was to have a long nap, and Kit devoted great pains to arrange the pillows artistically for his comfort, and to put the curtain to keep

off the draught, and to build up the fire to keep in without any fidgeting from Nellie, who was apt, in taking elaborate precautions against making a noise, to bring down an avalanche of fire-irons with a clatter enough to wake the seven sleepers.

Nellie was left on guard to read, if desired, and to keep out all intruders; and Tibby, Christy, and Jack were sent on a message to the farm — a message which Tibby suspected of being merely a subterfuge to get them out of the way, which was all very well for Christy and Jack, but unnecessary for any one who had proved himself worthy of more confidence.

So he went a little resentfully — which did not make him a pleasant companion to Christy and Jack — till they reached the farm and found that they were beating the walnut tree, which put any resentful feelings on one side, so interesting an employment is walnut gathering.

“And father was just going to sleep when Kit came in with her hat on,” Nellie complained, “and woke him up again. She came to say good-bye and kiss him; and I don’t think she need have done it, as he didn’t settle off again for a long time, and I had to read an awfully dull thing out of the *Guardian*. And when I asked her where she was going, and told her that her hat was all bent in at the side, she said, ‘Hush!’ as if it was I who had been disturbing father, and not her!”

CHAPTER XXIX.

IPHIGENIA.

"My poverty but not my will consents."

SHAKESPEARE.

"GOOD-BYE, father ! good-bye, dear old days !"
Kit was saying to herself, as she went down the familiar path to the beach, the path along which she used to help push mother's chair down to the sea, with —— She had to pull herself up when memory betrayed her into dangerous thoughts, which made her inclined to turn and run away, anywhere — anywhere except to the beach and what was awaiting her there.

It was a dull, heavy day, and the rain of yesterday had made the path muddy, and the bushes on either side heavy with moisture. The brambles caught at her dress, and branches weighed down by the rain struck against her, and discharged a chilly shower over the hat which Nellie had criticised as being out of shape.

She did not look like a girl going to meet her lover. She had made no attempt to look to advantage ; beneath her bent hat, her hair was twisted up anyhow, really anyhow — not with the *ars celare artem* of picturesque negligence. Her little jacket,

pulled on hastily, had its collar partly turned up, and her dress was splashed with the mud, though she held it up with her ungloved hands, which were red with the cold. Her breath came short and quickly, as she neared the bay, and, as she turned the corner where the beach became visible, she closed her eyes for a moment, with a sickening dread of what she would see.

Yes, he was there, sitting on a bit of rock, awaiting her, close to the place where, that July evening, she and —— Oh! why are poor mortals cursed with that ingenious tormentor — memory?

He saw her as she came down the path, and came to meet her, taking her two little, cold hands in his, and putting one of them under his arm in a protecting, proprietary sort of way, led her towards the rocks where he had been sitting. She felt a desperate wish to snatch her hands away and run, and he must have felt the recoil in the limp, cold hands, for he let them escape from his grasp, and dropped the *empresé* manner, and seated himself near her, waiting for her to speak.

If he had ever had any love for the girl — and I do not think at its best, it was worthy the name — there was very little of it remaining now, and as he looked at her, sitting there on the rock, he noticed all the little defects of dress and appearance with an almost irritable feeling akin to aversion.

If she had come, as he expected she would, crying, and gladly accepting his comfort and help in her trouble, softly submissive and making sweet little amends

for all her coyness and airs and graces, he could have taken her in his arms, and pitied and fondled her, and persuaded himself that it was really love that actuated him, apart from all money considerations.

But who could love or fondle a little stony-faced thing, with red eyes fixed on the grey, desolate sea, who shuddered and shrank away at his touch?

"Well?" he said at last. "I had your letter."

"Yes," she answered, withdrawing her eyes with an effort from the dull, tossing water, and looking at him. "We are in very great trouble, and you said you could help us."

She could not believe it possible that any man, if it was in his power to help, could insist, or wish to insist, on such a condition as marrying a girl who did not love him.

"Yes?" he said interrogatively.

"Father is ill, you know, and the money must be paid, and if you will lend us the money, every penny shall be repaid, if I work my fingers to the bone."

"I don't want you to work your little fingers to the bone." And he put out his hand as if he would have taken hers, only she put it behind her quickly. "I told you, Kit, there is only one payment I require, and that is quite in your power to give, and that is the only payment I will take."

She did not pretend to misunderstand what he meant.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose I know what you mean. But if I marry you, it will not be because I love you, it will only be because I want to get that two hundred

and fifty pounds to pay off the debt, and keep father from worrying."

Sinclair laughed a little, short, unpleasant laugh.

"Upon my word, Kit, we are very outspoken over this bargain of ours. You won't allow any decent pretences to be kept up."

"No," she said, "because it is not fair to you. If it is a bargain, it is not fair that you should think I have any love to give. And I thought," with a desperate little entreaty in her voice and her pleading eyes, "that, perhaps, you would not care to marry me if that is the case."

Again he laughed. "Well, Kit, I dare say I am a great fool, but I wish to marry you in any case; and I think I can undertake, if you will marry me, to make you get over this terrible dislike you have taken to me."

"I shall be very grateful to you," she said. "At any rate I shall always be very grateful, for, I believe, it will save father's life if you will pay that debt. It is just troubling over that, that has made him ill, and it would kill him if it went on."

"Well," Sinclair said and I think we may give him credit for a good deal of self-control, for it was certainly mortifying to a man to be accepted in this resigned sort of way for somebody else's sake — "Well, at any rate, gratitude is something to start with, and we may get something warmer presently. Look here, Kit, here is the very identical cheque you despised so when I first ventured to suggest it. Now, if you'll give me that lawyer's last letter, I'll go right off and

despatch the answer ; and I'll be very generous and not ask even for a kiss till that part of the business is done."

But, as he said it, he had an exasperated feeling that such a very unwilling kiss was hardly worth having from a girl who blanched and shuddered at the very word, and caught back her hand when she had given him the letter, as if his very touch was abhorrent to her.

He had to think very steadily of Philip Brownlow's dollars to endure such treatment philosophically, and he turned away and left her sitting on the beach, and making no move to accompany him, with a sensible feeling of relief.

And Kit sat there in a stunned sort of torpor, looking out to the grey, restless sea, where the fog was settling down dull and heavy. Presently she moved from the bit of rock and sat down on the shingle, just where she had sat when Rob left her. But she was not thinking of him, or of anything particular ; there was only the dull feeling that there was no escape now — no hope ; and the dead thump of the waves on the beach seemed to be beating it into her aching heart. "It is done ! It is done !"

It was a very forlorn little figure sitting there, with her head bent down on her knees, and the sea-fog coming curling up white and chill round her ; and some one, standing at the turn of the cliff path, and scanning the place as if in search of something, almost overlooked the figure sitting there, so small was it and so still.

The coastguards sometimes come that way, so Kit

concluded it was one of them, who came clattering down the shingle towards her, and she wearily tried to rouse herself and invent some plausible excuse for sitting there in the damp fog all by herself.

"Kit!" said a voice, with a world of love and delight in it; and as she tottered bewildered to her feet, Rob's strong arm caught her, and held her to a very tumultuously beating heart with a cool audacity that you never would have believed in the humble lover of three months ago, who could not even look at her when he declared his love.

But I think she required the support of that audacious arm, for she was shaken with such convulsive sobs, and could do nothing but gasp out, "Rob! Oh, Rob! Is it you?"

"Did I frighten you, Kit? What a fool I was to come so suddenly. Don't cry, dear — don't now!" His own eyes being very dim in sympathy.

"Rob, why didn't you come sooner? — why didn't you come sooner, if it had been only a day sooner, or an hour?"

"Well, you see, I came off directly I got your letter. I was coming, anyhow, with Mr. Brownlow; but when your letter came, I showed it to him, and we came straight away. But, of course, he could not travel as fast as I might alone, and I didn't like to push on and leave him."

She had extricated herself from that supporting arm, and stood looking at him, pushing the damp hair from her face, and looking at him in blank bewilderment.

"Mr. Brownlow?" she said. "I don't understand."

"No, of course you don't. It's Mr. Philip Brownlow — your uncle. You see, he was at Macklin when I got there. He and Mr. Guest are old friends, and he'd brought him along from New York to nurse him up a bit, as he'd been ill. He was awfully pleased to come across me, and hear all about you; and as he wasn't up to the journey alone, he asked me to come and look after him."

"Has he come, then?"

"Yes; he's up at the Vicarage now."

"But father" — Kit turned, and began making her way quickly up the beach — "he's ill, you know, and the doctor said he must not have any worry or anxiety."

But Rob stopped her with a hand on her arm. "He's all right, Kit. He was a bit taken aback and startled at first, but he's none the worse. And he won't have any more worry or anxiety now Mr. Philip's come home. Kit, didn't you know how awfully rich he is?"

"Rich? Uncle Philip?"

"Yes. Sinclair must have known all about it."

And at that name Kit's desperate sobbing began again, though now she would not let Rob's only too willing arms support her.

"Oh, Rob, it's too late! Why didn't you come only half an hour sooner?"

"Tell me, Kit." He was looking down at her with a puzzled look in his loving eyes. "I ought to

have written ; but I'm such a duffer at writing, and I came as quick as ever I could. Why is it too late?"

She strangled her sobs with an effort. "I have promised to marry Stuart Sinclair. It was only this afternoon. He has been very kind and generous" — the words came with a painful effort — "and there was no help except through him."

And then she resumed her way up the beach, with Rob walking silently beside her, stealing anxious, wistful looks at her face, trying to read an explanation of the sorrow and suffering written so plainly there.

At the steep part of the path from the beach he reached out his hand to help her, as in the dear old days, and she put her hand in his, and did not withdraw it directly the climb was over. He was careful to hold back the branches lest they should strike against her, and to disentangle the briars from her skirts at the cost of scratched fingers himself. He would have moved the stones out of her path if there had been time for such engineering works, and he would have outdone Sir Walter Raleigh by laying himself instead of his cloak in the muddy parts for her to walk over. Even in her trouble it was pleasant to be cared for.

As they drew near the village, at the last turn before you come in sight of the first cottage, under the holly bush, which is so constant a trysting-place for Lowburn lovers, Rob stopped her.

"Kit," he said, "wait one minute. I want you to tell me true if you care for this Sinclair. I don't be-

lieve you do really. You mustn't be angry with me for having the cheek to say so — I know you've promised to marry him — and I should like to wring his neck. Oh, I say, Kit, don't be angry! I'm awfully sorry."

It was so like the old Rob that, even in her trouble, Kit could almost have smiled.

"I want you to tell me quite honestly if you care for him. For, if you do, I'll do my best to get things a bit straight for him, for I fancy he's in a desperate hole at present."

In old days there was a certain ceremony in declaring the truth of a matter, of looking straight in the eyes of your interrogator — a ceremony that answered to putting a person on oath — an institution which I think I mentioned earlier in this history, when the matter in question was the colour of Kit's nose. And now Rob stood in front of Kit, and put her to the test; and she could no more have looked up into his honest eyes and declared that she cared for Stuart Sinclair than she could have perjured herself on the Holy Book before judge and jury.

So she turned away her face, and only said she had given her promise, and must keep it; and then they went on through the village to the Vicarage.

CHAPTER XXX.

UNCLE PHILIP.

“ And truth is this to me, and that to thee ;
And truth or clothed or naked let it be.”

TENNYSON.

THAT had been a strangely eventful afternoon at the quiet little Vicarage, and if agitation would have killed the old Vicar, I think there would have been very little chance for him.

Nellie had barely finished reading that dull article, and assured herself that the Vicar was sleeping peacefully, and that she might substitute “*Oliver Twist*” for the *Guardian*, when the driving in of a fly from the station at Seadown aroused them both.

Was it the doctor? Was it Stuart Sinclair? Was it, Mr. Brownlow wondered with a sinking heart, some emissary from that lawyer in London, of whose last letter he did not know?

But there was a prolonged conversation in the hall with Nurse — then it must be the doctor. And then luggage was being taken down and brought in — then it must be Sinclair. Finally Nurse came in with a very excited and important face, and that evident desire to break a piece of news gently which is more agitating to the receiver of the new, than the most direct and point-blank discharge of it could be.

Mr. Brownlow was not an impetuous or impatient man ; but Nurse's elaborate arts to introduce the matter by degrees became too exasperating, and he suddenly got up and opened the door, and found himself face to face with the brother he had not seen for years, and behind him Rob, hanging up his coat and hat in the hall as natural and as much at home as the eight-day clock just behind him.

They had been hale, middle-aged men when they had parted ; they were old and feeble now ; but they met with the old boyish names for one another that no one living had used to either of them for many a year.

"What, Phil?"

"Yes, Tom, here I am."

There was no thought for the time of how the one had come back, and whether it was still as the prodigal from feeding the swine and eating the husks, or if the other was still quietly flourishing in the well-to-do, sheltered life of the country Vicarage, which had been pictured so often as a haven of rest when the world's billows were running high and rough. It was just Phil and Tom, the two brothers who had played together, and sat on the same mother's knee, and shared scrapes and pleasures and lessons and holidays. I think that will be how people will meet in heaven, stripped of all outward circumstances of rank or age or looks or intellect or riches or poverty or success or failure.

And they sat close together over the fire in the dining-room and talked ; and, do you know, when Rob and Nellie returned — they had retired to the

stable, a favourite place for confidences, over Dimple's broad back -- the two brothers were talking, not of money-making or money-losing, of life's struggles, failures, or successes, but of a cricket-match they had played in when they were boys, and the old Vicar was slapping his knee with energy, and getting quite excited as he recalled "that catch you made, Phil; don't you remember?"

But after a time, of course, the talk came nearer the present time, and Philip Brownlow began telling of his good fortune.

"But you know all about that from Stuart Sinclair."

Rob had gone off, by this time, to search for Kit -- going first up to the farm where Nellie fancied she might have gone with the younger ones, and, by this *détour*, missing Sinclair, whom otherwise he would have met on his way up from the beach.

And then followed inquiries and explanations that made one old face sorry and perplexed, and the other fierce and indignant; and, in the middle of it all, Sinclair himself appeared coming up the garden path with that look of triumph and assurance that Kit's manifest repugnance had damped for a time, but that now asserted itself afresh.

Philip Brownlow rose as if to go out and meet him, and then sat down again, drawing his chair back out of the glow of the fire which was, by this time, the principal light in the room, as the fog was mixing with the shades of evening and hastening the approach of night.

Stuart opened the front door and came in without the ceremony of ringing, with the assured intimacy of "mine own familiar friend whom I trusted," and made his way straight to the dining-room, and, as he opened the door, said with that pleasant, cheery voice of his, that Philip Brownlow remembered so well enlivening his sick-room —

"May I come in? How are you, sir, this evening! Oh, I beg your pardon; I did not know you had visitors," he added, as he saw the indistinct figure of Philip Brownlow sitting in the shadow.

There were so few visitors at the Vicarage that he felt a minute's surprise at such an unusual occurrence; but never dreamed that it was the man from whom, as he imagined, the Atlantic separated him, if not that wider ocean of death. But the Vicar's face, even in the uncertain firelight, struck him at once as strange and altered; and a presentiment of something having gone wrong flashed into that triumphant mind of his that, as he hurried up from the beach, was full of the anticipations of the fortune that seemed already within his grasp. Could any letter have arrived since Kit left the house? — for certainly that unwilling consent would never have been given if the girl could have found a loophole to escape.

"I'm afraid you're not feeling well," he went on, after a pause, during which Mr. Brownlow said nothing, though his eyes were eloquent with a look of reproach. "But Kit told me I might come and write a letter here — a letter in which, I think, we are

all interested, and which I would have sent a month ago if Miss Kit would have given me leave. May I go and write it in your study?"

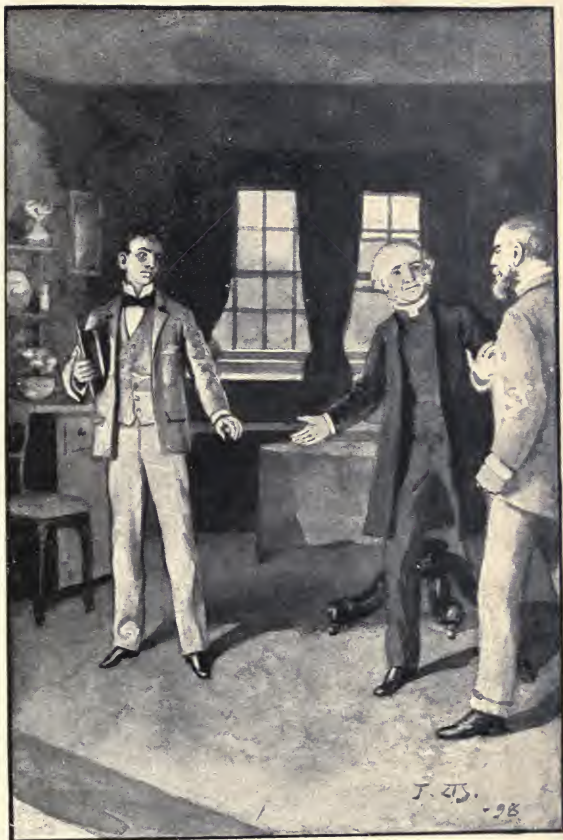
The situation might have been rendered infinitely more dramatic, and Stuart Sinclair have gone on to commit himself before that silent listener, if the Vicar's tell-tale face had not given the alarm, and his eyes had not moved from their reproachful look at Sinclair, to the visitor in the shadow of the chimney corner.

Sinclair's eyes involuntarily followed the glance, and saw the stranger raising himself stiffly from the low armchair in which he sat, leaning with his hands on the arms with a movement oddly familiar to Sinclair, though, even then, he did not realize who it was — this tall, old man, who seemed to tower above Stuart Sinclair, though he was a good height, as he stepped forward into the firelight. Philip Brownlow standing by his brother's side.

There is always something pitiful about an animal brought to bay, even if that animal be the veriest vermin. Even a screaming, fierce-eyed rat in a trap, with a terrier waiting all alert to finish him, or the brutal criminal in the dock, guilty of the most dastardly crime, when the judge puts on the black cap and prays God to have mercy on his soul.

The Vicar had risen to his feet, too, and stood between the two men, who were standing looking so fixedly at one another across the firelit room.

"Phil!" he said; "he can explain. I am sure he can explain."



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His words seemed to break the spell, and Sinclair gave an odd little gasping laugh, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know that explanations do much good," he said. "I've made a mess of it all round, and I may as well cry *peccavi* and be off."

What a curiously complicated machine human nature is, and its motives and imaginations past finding out! Even while Stuart Sinclair was feeling a sick horror of himself, and the part he had acted, and a desperate wish that he could have justified the Vicar's confidence, that he could explain all that had happened, and reinstate himself in their good opinion, he was feeling for the letter-case in his pocket, where Dr. Chambers' cheque was, and devising how he could get it cashed with the greatest safety.

That interview was not a long one. None of those concerned cared to prolong it. Philip Brownlow's words were few and stern, and the Vicar was so manifestly unfit for anything of a scene, and looked so white and shaken, and distressed, that that strange other self of Sinclair, who had a tender, considerate feeling for the old man, even while he would let him suffer the slow torture of anxiety that was nearly killing him, and who would have aimed a blow at him through his tenderest feelings, when he sacrificed the apple of his eye — his little Kit — even Sinclair was fain to cut the painful scene short on his account, and leave him in peace.

But as he turned to go, with an effort to keep his head up and meet Philip Brownlow's contempt with

defiance, and the Vicar's pity with nonchalance, and walk like a man without that odd tendency to slink and shuffle that shame involuntarily introduces into the gait, the door opened and Kit came in.

She looked quickly from one face to another — at the unknown uncle, standing on the hearth upright and grim; at her father, who had sunk back on the sofa, white and shaken; at Sinclair, who was trying so vainly to keep the hang-dog out of sight by a jaunty air of bravado. It was to this last that she stepped.

"Father," she said, "I promised Stuart Sinclair, this afternoon, to marry him, and if he wishes it, I will keep my word."

Sinclair had taken her hand in his, and he held up his other hand, to check the indignant expostulations of the one brother, and the remonstrances of the other.

"Thank you, little Kit," he said. He did not feel so mean a rascal with her hand in his, resting there with greater confidence than it had ever done before. "You'll hardly believe it, when you know the whole truth about me; but I really did care for you a bit, and I'm going to prove it now. If I kept you to your word, I might pay back some of the hard things I have had said to me this afternoon. Oh, I dare say I richly deserved them! — but I don't think they'd say them, for my wife's sake, if you were my wife. Kit Brownlow, I set you absolutely free, and when you are reckoning up the hundred and one things against me, you can set this one to my credit."

He patted the little, cold hand in his, and suddenly raised it to his lips and kissed it; and then turned and went out of the room, and out of the house into the foggy darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BY-AND-BY.

"If one should give me a heart to keep .
With love for the golden key,
The giver might live at ease or sleep,
It should ne'er know pain, be weary, or weep,
The heart watched over by me."

A. O'SHAUGHNESSY.

FOUR months have gone by since that foggy September day, and Rob is sitting up talking to Kit, in a large sunny drawing-room at Torquay.

Fog has cleared away, figuratively as well as literally, and life is very sunny and bright ; and the only little cloud in the blue sky is that Rob has come to say good-bye, as he is going back to Canada.

But it is a very different sort of saying good-bye, to that last parting. Rob does not sit with his miserable back turned, though there is a part of the programme on that occasion that he declares must be repeated — though Kit says it is horrid of him, and flushes a sweet rosy red on her little pale face, and threatens to take away a certain *gage d'amour* that Rob keeps sacredly in the pocket over his heart, though Kit declares it must be in memory of Nellie and her infamous needlework.

Rob has certainly learnt a wonderful lot of impudence the other side of the Atlantic.

Kit's face is very small and pale, except when Rob is impudent; and the hand he will not leave alone, but plays such silly babyish tricks with, is very thin and blue-veined. For after the strain of those September days, both Kit and the Vicar have wanted a great deal of care and nursing, before they were capable of enjoying the St. Luke's summer that came after that stormy autumn; and Philip Brownlow had carried them off to Torquay, and planted a *locum tenens* at Lowburn in the Vicar's stead.

On that table near Kit's sofa — for she is yet a very fragile little invalid, “not fit for a great, rough, farmer's wife,” she says, when she wants to tease Rob — are architect's plans of the house that Uncle Philip is going to build near Lowburn, as nothing can be found quite to satisfy him in the immediate neighbourhood; and this is to be everything a house should be, and money can make it. Kit is to reign supreme there, though it is rather a sore point between the two brothers, as to which house shall be her home; and Rob, when he holds that little blue-veined hand in his, laughs and says he reckons it will be neither, but a certain farmhouse in Canada, which is a bright imagination in the future.

Rob is a great favourite with Philip Brownlow, who has tried his best to persuade him to give up the idea of returning to Canada. But Rob has developed a certain independence and decision of character, as well as impudence, in those few months of absence;

and even at the cost of separation from Kit, he will go back, if for nothing else, to prove that the fellow she loves is not such a fool but that he can make his way like other men.

Nurse cannot get out of her head that Kit is fretting after Stuart Sinclair, and that the cause of her long illness was a broken heart. She was always a great partisan of Sinclair's, and never exactly understood what led to his sudden disappearance ; and she never could take Rob seriously—a feeling shared by our hero's father.

I think, if anything could have administered a prick to Dr. Chambers' inflated artificial manner, and reduced him to his natural size, it would have been the revelations about Stuart Sinclair, and the feeling how thoroughly he had been taken in by him. And if the incident of that cheque for £250, which was cashed the day after Philip Brownlow came home, had come to light, I think the operation would have been complete and permanent.

He was spared, however, that mortification, as the transaction was known only to himself and Sinclair ; and as Dr. Chambers kept his own counsel, Sinclair was not likely to do otherwise.

And that great medical work which is to make his name famous in future ages, has not suffered shipwreck with Stuart Sinclair, as seemed certain at first. The money necessary for the publication was placed at his disposal by Philip Brownlow.

"And pleased to do it, sir," the old man said, "for your son's sake. And I tell you what it is, he's

a son to be proud of — good, honest, sterling worth, without a lie in his right hand — altogether a different make to such as Sinclair. He's set on going out again and making his way for himself, and I know Guest will do his utmost to put him in the way of it, for he took as great a fancy to him as I did. And, by-and-by, if he and little Kit like one another, I sha'n't have a word to say against it, if they ask my consent."

And I think that that consent will be asked some day, but that Kit and Rob's liking has not waited for "by-and-by."

THE END.

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